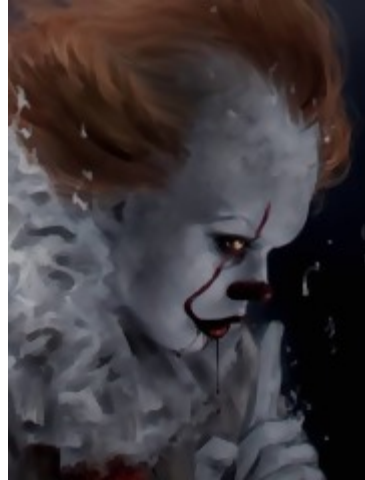




Lucidity by The Noble Rot

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Characters: Beverly M., Pennywise/IT

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Summary: Beverly Marsh has returned to Derry after only five years, drawn by the memory of something she can't come to terms with. When did someone so strong have such terrible nightmares? When did the unbreakable girl begin to crumble? When did anyone shed tears over a fallen monster? And when did 'it' become 'him' in her mind? Rated for violence, child abuse, sexual situations, language.

1. Chapter 1

Lucid lovers, me and you.

A deal of matchless value.

I was always quick to admit defeat.

Empty statements of bones and meat.

- Kishi Bashi, 'I am the Antichrist to You'

Chapter One: Emptiness

It's exactly as I remembered it. This place, this birthing ground of so many horrible nights and dreary mornings and tense afternoons. The brick façade of the shitty little apartment building where Daddy and I lived together alone in the years following my mother's death. He was a monster. And I killed him. Simple as that, really, so don't expect me to cry about it anytime soon. I'm not sorry, not about that. Not the only monster I faced that summer. And after offing him? I wasn't even sent to some kind of juvenile detention center or anything. Nothing happened at all. No one knew it had been me, you see. The house bore signs of having been broken into, there was blood everywhere. Most of it Daddy's, some of it mine. Not a whole lot, but enough. Poor kid, poor little teenager with no one to take care of her. Always a little troublemaker, too. Best to shuffle her off someplace; get her out of the town.

And so it had been a one way trip to the home of my mother's sister and her husband.

Portland was wonderful, a safe haven away from the pain and terror that plagued my life in Derry. Welcome respite desperately needed, and my Aunt Kathy and Uncle Dan had been solicitous and immensely kind. For four years, I lived with them. Graduated high school, healed from injuries both emotional and physical. Forgot so many things. Remembered so many more. Tried to date, tried to have a normal life, tried to wash away the carousel music that haunted my dreams every night and the sick crawling feeling in my skin that

came from a vile parent who couldn't keep his hands to himself. The prosecutor, the social workers, the policemen, the psychiatrist...all had tutted sympathetically at the murder. When I'd been found days later wandering as if in a dream down the street covered in blood, it was assumed that I'd fled the scene of the crime and hidden. 'You'll be alright', they all assured me. Blankets put around my shoulders, hot chocolate pushed into my hand in a paper cup. Packing a few bags and being taken to the home of a lady from church for a few days until it could be decided what to do with me. Great, now there was help and concern. The town that turns a blind eye to every crime and every disappearance had even turned a blind eye to the abuse I went through in my own life. But suddenly, I wasn't alone anymore.

When Aunt Kathy and Uncle Dan sent for me, life improved. But I'm eighteen now, and it's time to go home. The building in which we used to live, the building that belonged to Daddy the slum lord, Daddy the janitor, Daddy the pervert, is mine. The modest inheritance is mine. And I always felt wrong about running. The others all left town. Bill, Mike, Stan, Ben with his adorable chubby cheeks. Richie and Eddie. All of them gone, moved away to attend college or live with relatives. Something drove them away. And they stopped writing and picked up the threads of their new lives and chased the dreams that led anywhere but down. None of them write or call anymore. I never expected them to. Some tragedies bind people. Other tragedies drive them away.

My tragedy brought me home.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two: Rain

"You won't have a dining room, but there's a nice little breakfast nook just here." Mrs. Lassiter was saying on the day I moved home, patting her hand on the back of a plastic chair. I looked it over, not really caring about the renovations. It's a big 'whatever' from me, but I don't say that out loud. The apartment had lain empty all this time, no one wanting to move into it and no one having the power to demolish the building. I'd received offers to sell to this or that individual or firm, but I'd turned them all down. Like I knew what to even do with an apartment building.

There were only three tenants, and only one of them had been there when Daddy was still alive. Blind Mr. Mayfair, shuffling around his four rooms with the carefully arranged furniture, his rent checks paid by his son in Bangor. They came like clockwork, forwarded to me, and my uncle had known what to do with them. He found the addresses where I'd need to send tax payments, what building codes I would need to keep up with. He put the surplus into an account for me, made phone calls, handled it all until I could get to my feet and handle it myself. All the while, I waded numb and emotionless through the haze that follows agony, my thoughts on nothing except drawing that next breath. Letting it out. Taking another.

But now I'm here. Here, back in the apartment where it all began. It's been thoughtfully repainted and refurnished by the concerned members of my old church. Christian guilt at work, for the inability they had to lift a finger while my father touched me and whispered to me and beat me to silence. But hey, it's paid off in a nice new sofa, so I guess we're square. Thanks, congregation.

Three days in. I don't have to work. Dad's life insurance through the hospital job left behind almost a hundred thousand dollars, and of course this crumbly old building that's paid for. I haven't decided if I want to apply to the community college. There's no course offering for 'Clown Slaying', or 'Home-Based Survival Strategies' or maybe a degree in 'Not Being a Pussy'.

I don't have a skill set that I even care enough about to hone. And I don't feel like doing anything other than sit on the landing from sunrise to sunset, watching the people in the street move by and pointedly refuse to look back at me. There's hollowness in my stomach. I rarely smile. I'm waiting for something, but I don't even know what yet. On the evening of the third day, it rains. One of those fresh clean late summer rains that make you want to toss on a slicker and run out into the warm falling water and see where the rivers that form in the street lead you. Splashing through puddles, laughing. No one's doing that here, though. What's wrong, kiddies? Afraid to leave your homes? But you can, you know. For at least another couple of decades, anyway.

I stand up, rubbing at the sore backside that sitting still for so long has given me. Fuck this. When did *rain* become a trigger? But it is. I'm triggered. Happy, cumulonimbus clouds?! Happy, shitty little town of deaf and dumb people who don't let themselves see what's happening?! HAPPY?!

Before I can even think about stopping myself, before I can do something intelligent like grab a coat or a sweater or change out of my grubby sandals into a pair of sneakers, I'm stumbling down the metal steps. Out into the gray curtains of rainwater, breaking into a run, tears streaming down my cheeks. Running. Running until it hurts. I run, and it's not rage or terrors that motivate me. It's something else. Dreams, the psychiatrists said. Post-traumatic stress disorder. No clowns. No creatures that shapeshift and eat fear and kill children in creative and awful ways. Nothing like that exists, has ever existed. She needs rest and these pills. Green pills, blue pills, white pills, red pills. It's not real, Miss Marsh. Come now, take a rest.

But I *knew* you were real. I saw you. I fought you. I didn't fear you. You held me up off the ground and choked me and showed me the light within the dark and somehow, in that terrible moment of letting go, you freed me from everything. Floating in the darkness, I felt at peace for the first time in my life. But then *they* had come, and Ben pulled me down and kissed me like a damsel in distress. There had been no distress. I was free of pain. Floating, dreamless and beyond all fear or agony. If you are real, if all of that was real...then I am not crazy. I am not blind. I am not condemned to live out the rest of my life here in this town with my ears dulled to screaming and my eyes

unable to look too long at missing children posters. My mind trained to forget, forget, and forget some more.

The rain is up to my ankles as I run, looking into every sewer opening, watching for blood. Looking for a torn coat, a stray boot, a little paper boat coated in wax that was lost so long ago and never sailed to paradise. But of course there's nothing but the rain. The swirling dark water. You're not here. We killed you. Whatever remains now is probably lying in a heap of moldy satin at the bottom of a well in the ruins of the house on....

Oh God.

I stop, soaked to the skin and out of breath, and the rain all around me is a pounding cacophony of sound that even a child's scream could not be heard above.

Suddenly, I know where I'm headed.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three: Stones

No kid ever forgets the way through the neighborhood in which they grew up. Like salmon, almost, returning to the headwaters where they were born. Think about the place you lived as, say, a ten year old.

What's the fastest way to get from your back yard to the local candy shop? The ravine in the woods where you snuck wine with your friends or shared a stolen cigarette? Where are the paths, worn smooth by generations of children, that crisscross a town and know your feet even years later? My feet find them now, cutting across empty lots, over railroad tracks. Through the rain, the gray rain that falls on the just and the unjust and the sightless and the ignorant as well as the perceptive ones who put their heads down and push away the truth with liquor or drugs or sex. The rain soaks me to the skin, my too-large dress clinging to my legs and making it hard to run. No matter. I have all the time in the world.

Another turn, and there it is across the brown field full of bits of trash and heaps of turned earth where some enterprising landscaper came to collect topsoil. I stop, arms hanging uselessly at my sides, and stare across the expanse at the derelict house that crouches like a gargoyle against an iron gray sky. 29 Neibolt Street. The Well House. The place where You hide. Perhaps even live. Anything built there is doomed, of course. Be it a jail or a brothel or a church. Long ago the people of this town realized that it was futile to have anything commercial built on that spot. Mysterious fires, violent murders, people gone mad. This was the price of taking up residence here. The last attempt, a private home that was once possessing of a modest sort of grandeur, has lain empty for longer than I've been alive. The inhabitants leaving abruptly after not one but both of their children went missing within a month of each other. Only a fool would approach this place. Only a group of fools following a broken hearted leader who loved his brother and couldn't bear to just go home and forget like everyone else.

And now, only me.

I cross the field, my sandals sticking in the mud, and slog up the creaking worn stairs to the front porch. There's a moment of hesitation before I shove the front door open, and it swings silently inward. Only the sound of the rain, harder now, pounding down on the pavement behind me and bowing the heads of the sunflowers in the yard. The house seems to exhale, dust and gossamer cobwebs and the scent of withered leaves....and something else. I take a deep breath, savoring the strangeness of it, and step into the darkness. I pull the door shut behind me. In the foyer, broken boards on the stairs greet my eyes, tattered curtains hang over the windows, rats scurry through the walls and the wind moans around the sides of the house.

"What the hell are you doing here, Beverly?" I ask myself, hugging my arms against my body as the chill sets in. I can handle discomfort. God knows I've felt enough of it. Now what? What was I expecting? That there would be a giant, eight foot clown standing in the doorway with a plate of warm cookies, ready to invite me in? Maybe not so much, no. Where is it, where did we find you? Well you found us, really. Leading us through this house until finally, in the kitchen, there was the charge and then my hands were slippery with sweat on the fence spike and the tip was sharp and your snarl of pain and rage was inhuman. I move to the narrow hallway, the mud on my sandals making every step messy and treacherous. So I kick them off and leave them right where they are. Screw it. Barefoot, wearing a pale yellow sundress when I should be attired in battle armor, soaked to the skin and shivering, I tiptoe into the dirty kitchen and stand at the top of the stairs leading to the basement for what seems an eternity.

Then, one step at a time, careful to avoid piercing my foot on a stray nail or some other hazard, I make my way down. Down into the cold musty dark where the rats and the spiders and the Well opening await me. It was always supposed to be like this. Called here somehow. Salmon. The stream. Memories. Maybe I really was 'born' here. Certainly the very best parts of my courage and my resilience were laid bare here in this place, and down below in the tower room with the floating bodies and the disjointed carnival music and the scents of peppermint and decay and cotton candy and myrrh. Burial spices from ancient times, the scent that seemed to cling to your skin and clothes. Not unpleasant, but surely a smell that sent warning

down every jangling nerve.

I am in the basement now, and the Well is before me. No sound down here but the pounding of my heart. My breathing. Why am I here? Why? Did I come here to find you? Kill you? Just look at you and reassure myself that the nightmare was real? Did I come here to die? Hell of a way to commit suicide, really. Death by Clown. Maybe that's it, though. Maybe I really did come here to die. I approach the edge of the Well and lay my cold hands on its cold stones, sinking to my knees beside it. Staring at the rocks, trying to peer through the gloom. I can barely see a thing. But in the intermittent flashes of light from the storm outside and the barest shafts of wan daylight streaming through dirty windows, I can just make out black splashes on the rocks. Dried. Strangely patterned, as though some viscous liquid had beaded and rolled up instead of down. Mocking physics the way you mocked us all summer. Hesitantly, I touch one of the old stains, my wet finger succeeding in wiping off a small amount. I look at my hand, studying the minute smear. The bent fence spike, covered in dust and cobwebs, lies on the floor not too far off. Was it really me who wielded it?

I raise my fingertip to my lips, tasting the blood. Your blood. Eyes closing as the flavors of sickly-sweet candy and dark smoky salt bloom across my tongue. You were injured when you crawled down this well. And even more injured when you vanished into the deeper opening below this one. If I had any rope, I'd climb down and seek that secondary yawning mouth in the crust of the world into which you disappeared five years before. But the frayed end of the rope beside me is a mere four feet from the spool. Not enough to get anywhere. There are no ladders here. I have no way of getting down.

I came here to die. I came here to put the fear and the sorrow and the memories of Daddy's calloused hands on me to rest. I came here because you were the only miraculous thing that had ever happened to me, the one Thing above all other Things that made no sense and was not mundane and did not have such awful reality about it. Reality was your playground. And we, unwilling playthings. I rest my forehead on the bloody stone, tears running hot down my cheeks, mixing with your blood. It doesn't float. Whatever primal magic that animated it must have dried up long ago. Or perhaps your very being

is so decimated as to be unable to maintain its wondrous abilities. Black claws, blood orange hued eyes, immense towering height, grimy satin and the menace of tinkling bells. These were your accouterments, your glamour that shielded whatever in the hell you really were from our eyes and minds. How I wish I had died then, taken by a dark miracle, instead of facing the long defeat of life with some unremarkable ending when my body has had all it can take and my tortured mind finally succumbs to the pain.

There's a shard of glass not far off. Lightening takes a flash photo. Still life of wet girl in cold basement, broken glass on floor. Crumbling well nearby. My numb fingers reach for the sliver, and I carefully bring it to me. Across for attention, down for death. Right? Sure, that's how it went. I've had enough attention to last a hundred lifetimes. This is as close as I can get to the otherworldly being who should have finished me, but did not. The first cut stings horribly, but when I see the blood well up from the gash I feel only a sense of relief. I dig into my flesh again, teeth gritted, and slash from wrist to elbow. My hand fumbles, too slippery to hold the glass anymore. How long will it take? When I die, will it all go black? Will I see something beyond this world? Will you find me, devour my soul before I can escape to Heaven or Hell? Walk into the Deadlights, Bevie.

The last thing I'm aware of as unconsciousness takes me is the feel of claws closing around my upper arm, and a menacing, cold voice hissing at me.

"Idiot girl," it says, low and lethal. There is only darkness, soft warm darkness to sink into. Everything fading. "You could not leave well enough alone, could you."

4. Chapter 4

A/N - I have been the target of a petty internet bully lately, and have had to begin the tedious task of screening reviews before they post. While the whining, lies, and uninformed opinions of my detractors do not bother me, the drama is upsetting to those around me. I will not tolerate it. No one should. Having said that, I welcome anyone to write to me privately if they wish to quarrel. To those who read my work for enjoyment, continue to do so! Those of you who actually read the preceding chapters know that this is not a 14 year old girl and a demon clown. Beverly has aged, she is damaged and hurting and seeking something miraculous. And the miracle is not about to disappoint her. ;) - NR

Chapter Four: Water

It's the sound of dripping that awakens me. Blood? Is it my blood? I can't move, my whole body feels shot through with pain. Not just the agony from the wounds on my arms, but also a deep soul-pain that has been with me for too long and is now almost crippling in its intensity. I try to open my eyes...no dice. The aroma that reaches me tells me where I am though. Not in a thousand years could I forget the musty mineral aroma of the subterranean stronghold that you called home. How the hell did I get here? The last thing I was aware of was glass, sharp and clean, slicing through my skin. Then just a blur.

With a groan, I struggle to at least role to my side, succeeding after a few moments of effort. My eyes slide open as though weights were attached to the lids. Wood, not stone, is what greets my gaze. Worn, warped wood suffused with a subtle reddish glow. Heavy red velvet fabric draped in folds down one side of my field of vision.

"Oh my God."

I sit up abruptly, too fast, and pain shoots through my head. The stage. I'm lying on the stage that once you danced upon, and my clothes are sticky with my own blood. I feel faint and dizzy and sick. Shit, too sick. I barely make it to the edge and roll to the stone floor before I'm on my knees, heaving up what seems like everything I've

eaten for the past twelve hours. It's while I'm shivering there, the taste of vomit in my mouth, supporting myself on my trembling arms, that I notice the scars. Jagged and pink, puffy skin in a line down each arm. No wounds close this fast. It looks like they've been healed a month already. Staring at the marks, moving one shaky hand to my mouth to wipe my lips, I don't even notice the moment when my solitude is broken.

But I feel it.

A heaviness to the air, the breathless tension of a looming thunderhead just over the horizon. Blood and starlight, the faint aroma of stone and ancient wood, arcane secrets, bones that lie deep within the earth and have not seen the light since humans were still in their infancy. The scent of popcorn and cotton candy. Far away, as though carried on a breeze that shifts just the right way, and is then gone.

"The Clown." I whisper the word, goosebumps rippling across my skin and lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. I wobble to my feet and hug myself. Human, thy end is near. But my self-inflicted injuries are closed, however unsightly the scars, and I'm not dead. Wouldn't I be dead already if you wanted me that way? Or do you have to play with your food a little first to get the full effect? I turn in a circle, looking for you all around me in every shadow. But you're not there. When you'd kidnapped me five years ago and dragged me down here, you made your presence known with flair not long after my eyes opened. I felt you then too. But now? There's no pageantry, no flair, no clown dancing on a stage and then leaping out to grab me. There is silence and shadows and dripping water. I should find the exit, get out of here. Stumble back to the light and get the hell out of town. Go back to Portland. Drink myself into a stupor like Aunt Tess does every night, fall asleep in the little double bed in their guest room and forget all this and wake to a world where clowns sell junk food and cereal.

"Do you know what floats?" I ask the empty darkness, "Nothing, you illusion. Nothing floats. We're all just falling slowly."

A moldering clown doll pops out of a jack-in-the-box in the midden heap nearby, and a little voice comes from it.

"Your hair is winter fire, January embers. My heart burns there, too.
Your hair is winter fire, January embers. My heart burns there, too.
Your hair is winter fire, January embers. My heart burns there, too.
Your hair is winter fire, January embers. My heart burns there, too."

It repeats the poem to me, brokenly. Over and over until its little voice fades.

I kneel again here in the fetid darkness and stare at the little bobbing toy with its mocking voice. My head feels like it's in a vice grip and my eyes burn. Weakness floods my limbs, they don't want to obey me. I have no idea what's real and what's some death-dream caused by firing synapses as the rest of my body shuts down.

"I wanted you to be real." The words come out brokenly, grief and anger cracking my voice. The sweat has even dried on my forehead. Somewhere outside, high above in a world that doesn't belong to me any more than I belong to it, the rain is still falling and the water is still swirling down into nothingness.

"We killed you. I didn't want to kill you. But I couldn't abandon my friends. They needed you dead. I knew that was impossible. I went back, you know. To the well. But there was only blood and nothing more. It was late. So late. Just me, and all that wreckage. I called for you. I didn't even have a real name to call. Just Pennywise. I knew you wouldn't answer. I was terrified that you would. It broke me when you didn't."

Nothing is floating down here now. It's still and dark as the places between the stars. I look to the side, my eyes searching the darkness. "I came here to die. I wanted to die here like I should have. With you. For you. The only time I felt alive was when you were killing me. How is that for fucked up?"

Still nothing. With a sigh, I close my eyes and bow my head. "I need water."

Beside me a broken pipe suddenly begins to gush water. I reach out a pale hand to touch the stream, lifting a few drops to my lips, and it is clean. Greedily I drink my fill, cupping my hands and pouring the icy water into my open mouth. Washing away the sour taste of sickness.

Feeling infinitely better, I slick my hair back and address the darkness that holds and hides you again.

"You were in my dreams every night, Pennywise. You dominated my nightmares. I woke up screaming so many times. My Aunt and Uncle thought it was post traumatic episodes from what my father had done to me. Or from the near-death experience I had underground with a serial killer who escaped. That's what they called it. Do you know...Henry Bowers confessed to the murders. All of them. He's in prison now, tried as an adult. He'll never see freedom again. No one really mourned him."

At last, movement in all that shadowy blackness. Two pinpoints of orange light eight feet off the floor. My breath catches, but only for a moment. I turn my whole body towards you, rising to my feet again. Woman-child and otherworldly being regard one another across the vastness of the sewer vault. I want you to speak. You do not. So I speak again, and say what I've come to say.

"Will you let me change clothes? I'll come back to the house and wait in the living room for you. I've been preparing for this, actually. It's why I cut myself. To attract your notice if you were here, to just end it if you weren't. Twenty minutes, and you will have me. No tricks. No fighting. No running. Unarmed and alone. What's twenty minutes more, when you've waited this long?"

Your huge body shifts, and it is like hearing a rhino moving in its enclosure. And then, finally, words.

"Go. Leave now, before I change my mind."

It's the voice that brings my mind to perfect clarity once more. Ageless and familiar. But something's changed...you're not cackling or sneering at me. The voice is deeper and less mocking. It's not so much the voice of a clown, but soft and intelligent and dripping with menace.

I nod and turn to leave. I know the way out, and none of the passages are blocked. The doors open easily when I push against them. It's a rare mercy, letting me do this at least partially my way. More than I'd hoped for, actually. You can afford to be a little kind right now. Your

prey is finished with running. This is always how it was supposed to be.

I walk home in the rain. When I reach the house, I go inside and up to the room that used to be my own. I've barely unpacked a single thing except the dress I wanted to wear for the end. I take it down from the hanger on the wall at the foot of the bed, and carry it with me to the bathroom. Twenty minutes. I won't be late. Not for this.

Apple scented body wash, the nice kind that people give at Christmas. I shave everything from the neck down, carefully to avoid nicking myself. There will be plenty of time to bleed. I know I will, and I know it will hurt and there will be teeth in this skin. It's so strange, how little fear I feel. The sensation in my chest as I rinse shampoo from my hair is more like the feeling you get right before bed after a long and difficult day. You were always the method of suicide I'd chosen. The glass in the abandoned house, slicing my arm open...that really was only to call you. And you came. You actually came.

Stepping out of the shower now, I dry off and rub my whole body with apple scented lotion, not missing any spots. My most expensive underwear, the best silk stockings, the diamond earrings that Mom left me before she died. The ones Dad always wanted to sell but couldn't find because I hid them. Ivory colored slip. And the white dress. I sewed it myself, stitch by stitch, in senior Home Ec class as my final project. The praise I'd received! No one knew I was stitching my own burial gown. But I was. I step into it and draw up the zipper.

Carefully, with the care of a bride on her wedding day, I apply my makeup in the dirty mirror over the sink in the bathroom that had been filled with so much blood years and years ago when you first began to terrify all of us. The blood only I could see. I wonder how brutal you'll be as you kill me. How much it will hurt. It doesn't matter. Just a little more pain, and then the January embers will go cold and dark and there will be no more nightmares and no more longing for the void and no more pain ever again. This is right. This is as it should be. This is how it always should have been.

Finally finished, I take the only other object I need from the box I brought with me. An old and worn doll, the doll that has absorbed a

million tears of pain and fear and anger and desperation. The doll I clutched during every moment of the night all growing up, thinking that she could hear me and understand me and that she, at least, would store up all the pain in my life and keep it stored inside her cloth and plastic body. Keep it, like a vault of memories, so that it wouldn't poison me. I pause to look in the mirror, studying myself from head to toe. A sense of calm settles over me, and I nod to my reflection in the glass.

"See you around, Beverly." I tell myself. Because how do you bid farewell to the story, shut the book, and set it on the shelf? How? There's no ceremony to be held here. No candles or dirges or village elders to carry the sacrifice to the volcano. Just me, and this dress, and this doll. It's my gift to you, a toy filled with all the tears I had to hide and all the pain I whispered into the dark. I walk from the house through rain that is now only a mist, and make my way on foot down the gray street. A few curtains twitch, people looking out at me now. Watching me pass by. I don't look at them. I just keep walking, until I am again in front of the abandoned house where my journey ends. I don't pause to cry or take one last look at the sky or anything else. I've had plenty of time to look at the sky, to weep, to linger barefoot in the grass. It's enough. All of it was enough.

I walk up the steps and into the house, pulling the door shut behind me.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five: Broken Doll

It's still and dusty and reverent inside the house on Neibolt Street. And maybe it's the fact that this is the end, but somehow the room and everything in it is beautiful in a way that none of it was before. Even the dust shimmers like glitter in the pale beams of late afternoon sun that break through the clouds here and there. I look around at it all fondly, wondering why I never noticed it before. I'd once heard a story about Saint Lawrence, the deacon condemned to die for heresy by a cruel Roman prefect. His method of execution was unbelievably cruel even for the times. Slow roasting on a grid iron before the assembled townspeople, that they may know the price of rebellion. The flames were lit, the iron heated to a red glow, and the saint was tied to the grill over its slow fire. But Lawrence was burning with so much love for all he had been and all he had done and the treasure of being given even a little time to do good in the world that he almost did not feel the flames.

I wonder what I'll feel when you come to me.

"It's alright." I tell the doll in my hands. "This is right. This is how it's supposed to happen."

Waiting in the breathless room, I look at the light on the worn floorboards. Something to memorize before the long darkness. Every comfort I've ever known has been stripped or crushed or taken from me in one way or another. Greta was my tormentor in school, filling trash bags with water only to have them dumped on me. Putting gum in my hair or tossing my school lunch on the floor in the cafeteria. School was supposed to be a time for mental and social growth. Education. But no, not with Greta there. Not with Henry Bowers there. Not with any bully there.

Home wasn't an escape, either. I'd find excuses not to return home, even go as far as to get myself in trouble. Detention after-school was more of a mercy than a punishment. I knew that if I stayed at school long enough that my father would tire of waiting, maybe drink himself to sleep if I was really lucky. Most nights. But there were

some nights where he drank a lot and stayed awake for hours. The mornings after those nights, I'd spent an extra half an hour in the bathroom to apply a layer of makeup to cover the bruises that he left on my face. I couldn't do anything about the body. Long sleeves, tall boots. Anything to cover what had happened. It was all I could do.

Things were starting to change when I met Ben and grew close to the rest of the Losers. I thought that I'd finally found my home away from hell, but even they left Derry after what happened. They stopped writing, stopped caring about the redhead that made all of them blush that one summer so many years ago. Now I'm here, awaiting my death.

It's quiet, like a cathedral. I stand still here in the room, holding my breath, until I feel the warmth of a shadow on my back.

I know what it is. I know who it is. And a sense of unnatural calm descends over me. Slowly, I turn around.

And I have to look up. Way up. The last time that we were this close, you had your hands around my throat. White flesh, not paint on human skin. Not at all. That would be something that might alleviate the fear a little, the thought that you were wearing a clown's makeup like a human might. No, this is different. Your flesh is truly white, with hair-thin cracks around the hairline of your preternaturally broad forehead. Wild orange hair the color of flame. Markings of blood red. Markings, not paint. For just like your skin, these red lines that serve as the demarcation of your inhuman jaws are as much a part of you as the marbled pale flesh that seems to glow in the yellowish light that streams through the dingy windows. You haven't aged of course. You're still precisely the same, perhaps a little bigger than the last time we came face to face. But then, I'm bigger too. Your regalia is as I remember, tattered satin and silk in a parody of some giant Harlequin doll come to life. The ruffled collar has a few bloodstains on it, and I'm not naïve enough to imagine that it's animal blood. Or yours. All of this, I take in within a few seconds. But it is your eyes that are truly arresting. As they always were. Horribly strange and horribly intelligent, golden deepening to red near the pupils.

I freeze, the mouse beneath the shadow of a hawk, and we simply

regard one another. Your full, blood red lips part, and I can see the glint of razor sharp teeth behind them.

"Beverly Marsh." You speak my name carefully, with relish, and your voice is hypnotic. "So young, though not as young as when we last met. I must say, the young do not often seek death, especially not a vicious and painful and terrifying one."

The red nose twitches as you sniff at me, and God only knows what you're able to detect.

"You're not like the others that I've come across. You never were. What would bring a fractured young thing like you back to the site of her greatest battle? And alone, no less."

Good GOD you're huge. I feel ice forming in the pit of my stomach. I would back up, inch away, make a break for the door if I thought I had a chance of reaching it. But it might as well be a thousand miles away, and you and I in the middle of nowhere. I hold out the doll to you, not looking away from those large red-gold eyes. Because this is what I came for. You are what I came for. An abandoned living room, an eight foot tall clown, a girl in a white dress ready to die, and a doll between us. It's such a little thing, the way your huge white-gloved hand takes the gift, but it's important. This is important.

"Not so young anymore. I guess I never was. But you know already, don't you. You read us. All of us. You read our histories and our fears and the things that haunted us, and you became all of it. You're the most deadly thing I have ever known. No one believed us, you know. I mean, believed them. I wasn't naive enough to tell the police or the social workers what I'd seen. Part of me didn't say because I knew they wouldn't believe me. Part of me didn't explain because I figured there might be some small chance that they DID believe me, and they might come looking for you. Hurt you, or kill you. The world needs its monsters, Pennywise."

Silence. Your teeth will be in my flesh soon enough, and all the secrets I ever had will be swallowed down along with the fleeting joys and the pain and the terror and the exhaustion. I am so tired. And you are as beautiful in your way as the dust motes in the room; the worn floorboards. Release and an ending of everything.

"I wanted to die in some miraculous way. You're the only miracle I know. But before you do it...and I know it's going to be brutal, and I'm not asking you to alter that. I didn't come here for mercy. But before it happens, I want to thank you. For...you know...all of it. That was the greatest summer of my life. You shook me up and gave me something bigger to fear than daddy. You showed me I was strong. I don't know what you are, or where you came from, or how long you've lived and how long you'll keep living. But I bet no one has ever told you that you were valuable before. So I guess I wanted to say it.

Life wasn't a friend to me. So before I go, I want to make friends with Death. Take me where you need to take me. I hope that, even though I'm not scared, you can still absorb something usable. I'm grateful to you. I should have died that summer, maybe. But I wasn't ready. I am now. There are no miracles left in the world...not one. Except you."

I look up at you again, up to the towering figure that stands poised to rip me apart. With a hand that doesn't shake, I reach up and touch your face. Then, when you don't immediately jerk back, I wrap my arms around your steel-strong torso and press my cheek against your chest. A lamb, hugging a wolf in the moments before the hot rush of blood and the agony and the momentary fear. 'Vicious clown with fire eyes, hold me fast that I may die. Death with you is hardly more, than the little deaths before.' Scrawled in a notebook in some class at the new high school, my mind two years back and a hundred miles away, already thinking ahead to this moment now. I close my eyes, and hold onto you as long as you will allow before it's time.

"I'm ready."

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Monster

The angry shove or the sudden attack does not come. You stand still as a marble statue, allowing your prey to hold onto you. And maybe you have never been hugged before and don't even understand what I'm doing. But finally all this silence and unnerving stillness is too much for me, and I step back. Letting go and looking up at you. The huge flame-colored eyes studying me. Considering. In your hand the doll hangs limply while you clutch her, pondering what to do or say next. Finally, those red lips part to show the broken glass teeth.

"If this is some sort of game or trick, little girl..."

"It's not. You know it isn't. You can read that in me, right? Smell me."

And you do. Bending down to snuffle my hair and read the delicate pheromones and chemical reactions that will tell you whether I am lying, whether this is a ruse to keep you distracted while the others assemble and attack. Sensing no deception, you rise to your full height again and tuck the doll into your belt. Your voice is melodious, a low growl beneath every word.

"I could have killed you, in particular, so very many times Beverly. In the garage, I came for you first. I chose you to attack not because you were the weakest member of your infernal little club, but because I wished only to take one of you and you were my selection. When I held you by the throat in my dining hall I could have snapped your neck like a twig. I have the strength, child."

In agitation, your black claws ease through the fabric of your gloves, and my eyes flick down to watch them warily. You're not the only one who's expecting an attack. And maybe neither one of us has a better reason to be on high alert. You are the stronger one here. That's clear. But we hurt you badly five years ago. I don't step away. I don't run. I just listen to your words, taking in the information.

"I thought you couldn't. Because....because I wasn't afraid of you."

A huff-snarl of scorn rises from you, as though my statement was beneath contempt.

"I consume both flesh and fear. You may not have provided one, but you certainly could have provided the other. I tasted your blood while you were unconscious earlier. It was as sweet as I imagined. Nothing is standing in the way of my killing you now, Beverly. Nothing at all except the fact that I do not wish to."

I blink. Of all the things I was expecting you to say, that wasn't among them.

"You're not.....not hungry?"

"I am always hungry."

"Then why? Why aren't you killing me?! I didn't come here to have a chat with you! I don't want to talk to you at all, dammit! I came to get this over with! What are you, a Bond villain?! Are you going to tell me your plans for world domination now?!" I snap, irrational and insane anger tinged with fear and horror and sorrow all at once ripping through my system. I'm exhausted. A lifetime of pain has culminated in this moment, and now you're not even letting it go the way I wanted. You had no trouble scaring the shit out of us all before! You ripped a child's arm off, for God's sake! I strike out at you, making contact with your chest. My small fist thumping harmlessly off satin covered stone.

"WHY?! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"

But it's no use. Your long fingers close over my wrist, easily bending it back until I let out a sharp cry.

"You will not strike me, you insolent little girl. Do not mistake the patience of a predator for mercy. Be still, and listen."

"NO!"

I am jerked off my feet and slammed bodily down on the dusty, broken sofa. So abrupt is the impact that it knocks the wind out of me. Instinctively, I raise my hands to ward off a blow. But it never falls. When I open my eyes you're standing over me, pupils

constricted to pinpoints in a sea of pure red. They do change color. Your eyes change color with your moods. Some detached part of me notes this, and files it away.

"Are you finished?"

I can't speak yet, still stunned. All I can do is dumbly nod. Not human. You are not human and yet you can speak and think and reason and demand and compel obedience. And you have something you want me to hear. You talk differently. Your voice is deeper. You're not acting like a psychotic carnival reject. I rub my wrist where you'd grabbed me, surprised to find it unbroken.

"I will take your silence as a yes." Your words come out as a hiss between clenched teeth. A little shake, and I swing like a doll in your grip. "I do not know why I have no wish to kill you. You certainly deserve it. But in sixteen billion of what you call years I have learned to listen to my instincts. They seldom misdirect me. If I do not want to rip your flesh from your bones at this moment, perhaps I will later when I am hungry."

Sarcasm. Positively dripping with it, and when you lean down I find myself face to face with you... a whole hell of a lot closer than I'm comfortable with. Jesus Christ, those red lines....I know what they're for now. I wish I didn't know.

Not a clown's greasepaint, but an animal's markings. It's where your head splits open like a horrible flower to reveal the throbbing lights that fuel your malice and hunger and animate those eyes that narrow when they look at me. I should be sobbing and begging for my life. But as before, I feel only a dull, numb sense of inevitability. Either you'll kill me or you won't. I'm not going to writhe in terror waiting to find out which.

"If you're...not going to eat me?" You nod ever so slightly, and I swallow hard and continue. "If not that, then what? What are you going to do with me? Just let me walk out of here and go back to my stupid little broken life? You did this shit to me, you know. To all of us. You broke us and left these quivering fucked up people who jump at shadows and can't even walk down the grocery aisle because there are clowns on cereal boxes. And forget a certain fast food chain. You sucked the joy out of our lives and -"

"Ohhhhhhh spare me the dramatics." Straightening up again, arms folded across your chest. Looking down at me with open contempt. "Shall I show you what you and your little Loser's Club did to me? It takes a great deal to injure one of my kind. Yet you managed it. Shall I show you the faint and faded marks on my back from the chain you beat me with? The healed bites from dull little human teeth? Oh, but your cheeks redden at the very mention of seeing such things. And your hands tremble. How pathetic, that you cannot stomach your own handiwork. It will please you to know that you delayed the Long Rest by a full three months while I healed. Arrogant, irritating little food."

You unfold your arms, hands on your hips now, and some of the rage leaves your face as you stare at me. How odd, that I can even read the expression.

"I should kill you."

"But you won't."

"No, Beverly. I suppose not."

There is a long, long, aching silence. I study your costume, your wild orange hair and white skin and the markings on your face. My brain whirls, thinking a little more about the change in your voice and posture and demeanor. Outside, the shadows lengthen with the coming of evening. It will be night soon. I can't believe how tired I am, how much my body and soul ache. I was supposed to be dead or dying by now, not sitting here waiting for a monster to make his decision. I want to ask you questions. Find out if you had nightmares about us after that summer that seems a thousand years ago. Do you stay in this form when you're alone? During the hibernation, do you sleep in a nest or a bed? How many teeth do you have? Do you ever have to pee? Do you eat anything besides children? Do you ever relax? Watch sports? Have a beer after a good messy kill? Are you ticklish? Are you even male? Does it even matter? Do you have offspring?

The questions come rapid-fire in my head, but not a single one rises to my lips. I fold my skinny arms across my skinny chest...Daddy always called my breasts mosquito bites...and focus my attention on

your shoes. Dusty clown shoes, the red pompoms ridiculous and menacing all at once. Just like you.

"You cannot leave, you realize. Not after coming here and seeing me once more. I won't allow it."

I don't even look up at the words. I just nod.

"I know."

"I do not take prisoners, Beverly Marsh. You are too old to amuse me with your terror. There will be no Floating this time."

"Alright."

One of your feet flexes inside the shoe, and the distinctive ripple of claws moves beneath the fabric of the toe. Good God, you must have talons there too. I shudder, but not unpleasantly. Slowly, my head comes up and I look at you again. In the dim light your features are less prominent. The cracks near your hairline where the beast within threatens to burst forth from the beast without are softened. Your markings appear black, not crimson. Only the burning orange eyes, deepened to red near the center, are fiercely alive and nearly glowing. Your hands flex at your sides, black claws visible through the tips of the white cotton fingers. I wonder how much you can smell of my intentions and my fears and my hatred and my confusion and the precious mental illness that drove me here.

"Get up, child. Ascend those stairs. They will hold your weight, scant as it is. At the top you will find a hallway, with rooms to either side. The master bedroom is at the end of the hall. By the time you reach it, the room will be sufficiently clean and comfortable for a human's needs. Every atom of this house is under my control. Do not try to leave."

"I won't."

"Good." You straighten up a little more, huge and nightmarish in the small dirty room. I can smell you, faint scents of cotton candy and burned popcorn and myrrh and wet stone. "I wish to hunt. It would be safer for you if I fed now. Are you hungry?"

The question surprises me. But I nod a little.

"I am, yes. I haven't eaten since....I don't know."

"I will bring you food. We can't have you fainting from hunger, after all."

"Why not? Why would you even care about my comforts or me being hungry or anything else? I thought you hated me. I thought you hated all of us."

"I could have slaughtered you a dozen times over if that had been my wish." You snap, irritated. The hair-trigger temper is something I will need to be mindful of. I lower my head again. Your tone softens, but only a little. "You intrigue me. I will keep you alive as long as the fascination holds. The moment I tire of you, I will kill you. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"I think it's sadistic."

"Excellent. Then we understand one another. Now on your feet. Do not make me ask a third time."

Numbly, feeling like this is all a dream, I stand up. You tower over me by probably two feet, which is menacing in and of itself, but the added dread of the suddenly bared teeth makes me step back. Too close, Beverly. Too close. I move toward the stairs, keeping an eye on you.

"When will you come back?"

"When my hunger is sated. I will not wake you if you are resting."

"Ok." I bite my lip, my hand on the rotting bannister, reluctant for some reason to walk away just yet. "You can smell emotions, can't you. And read minds."

"I can."

"Have you been...reading mine?"

You tilt your head, sniffing the air delicately. And there is no smirk

or smile on those red lips. "Yes. Baffling as your deeper thoughts are. I wonder what illness you suffer from, to even have them."

"No one's ever....?"

"No."

"So you haven't.....?"

"Do not be absurd, human. I am here to eat your kind, not mate with you. Your vulgar attraction is as insane as it is insulting. Although your attempts to bury it are amusing."

My face burns hot, tears spring to my eyes. I feel as though I've been shot in the chest. To have the deepest, most buried, most twisted and worrisome intrusive thoughts laid bare like this is pure agony. I can't look at you. I can't.

"It's not so insane. There's even a name for it. For being....being attracted to....whatever. Teratophilia. I looked it up. And no, there's no medication recommended. Don't fool yourself, I don't ENJOY the dreams, or the thoughts. That's why I wanted you to kill me. But you're too much of a pussy to –"

My words are cut off when, a split second later, your hand is wrapped around my throat. Well this is familiar. With a vicious jerk, you slam my back against the railing. I fight you, slapping ineffectually at the hand that grips me.

"Accuse me of cowardice again. I dare you." You whisper, close enough that I could count your eyelashes if I had the ability to think clearly. I'm still struggling, trying to breathe. I can only choke out an apology.

"S-sorry!"

"S-sorry." You repeat, mockingly, and release me. "Fool of a girl. You cannot handle me even when I am barely touching you. What makes you imagine for a single moment that you could handle anything else. Go to your room. I will return by midnight. Bathe yourself. You stink of that house your father kept you in."

I hardly need prodding. Without a response, I turn and run-crawl up the stairs. Fleeing you. But you don't give chase, not this time. I don't stop running until I reach the end of the hall, and I throw myself against the door to the room you've ordered me to stay in. Throwing my weight against the door, I rush inside and slam it behind me. And then, my back to the door, I slide down to the floor and cover my face with both hands.

What the hell have I gotten myself into.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter Seven: Coulrophile

It is a full ten minutes before I even lift my head to take in the altered room around me. I've only ever been as far as the kitchen and the basement before, and the deep places beneath the house. But what I saw had been old and rotting and decrepit and abandoned. The home of rats, mold, dust mites and one very bad tempered monster. But the moment my eyes adjust to the lack of illumination, I can see immediately that this room has been changed beyond belief. Heavy cream colored drapes partly cover the windows. There's a fireplace in here, and it looks as though it's never even been used. But there seems to be wood stacked nearby. I didn't bring a lighter. Just this dress and these shoes and the doll I gave you. But I get to my feet and carefully make my way to the hearth, the high heels sinking into a luxurious rug that I'm positive didn't even exist an hour ago. I kick off my shoes to enjoy the sensation, and my sore feet are immediately enveloped in warmth and comfort. Wow. For a crumbling haunted house, this is a dream bedroom.

I kneel down by the fireplace, somehow not even surprised to find long wooden matches in an ornate metal container to one side. I light one, poking it at the kindling already laid neatly across the grate, and within moments a warm yellow light begins to suffuse the room. The long match still burning in my hand, I stand up and look around for a candle or.....yep, there's an oil lamp on the antique bureau to my right. I fumble the glass hurricane off to expose the wick, and light it. This room is something straight out of a Victorian painting. Holding the lamp in my hand, I move through the flickering shadows to explore your handiwork. Outside, the rain has only intensified, running in rivulets down the glass panes of the windows. There's another lamp, and I light that too. Then a third. And finally, I can see everything.

An immense four-poster bed dominates one side, covered with an indigo coverlet turned back at one corner to reveal pristine white sheets. No rats making a nest in here. I wonder if you create this kind of splendor for yourself, when you're alone. Or is it just for me? Are

you showing off? I run a hand over one of the soft pillows, my fingers sinking into the first silk-covered down I have ever touched. The best room I'd ever stayed in had been the guest bedroom of my Aunt Kathy's house. But it was nothing like this. Nothing. I move my hands down the full length of the bed, a little stunned at the sheer size of it. A full grown rhino could bed down here and have room to spare. But of course....you probably create everything a little bigger than normal because you yourself are so huge. For some reason, that thought makes me shiver despite the warmth of the room.

Don't think about the big killer clown reclining in bed. Do you even own pajamas? Jesus Christ, Bevie. Stop it. What the hell is the matter with me? You're hideous. I hate you. You're a lethal miracle with too many teeth and the temperament of a pissed off cobra. You're not my friend. You're my enemy. Right?

I move away from the bed, hugging myself. Feeling a little disoriented for a moment. Guilty, almost, for experiencing that persistent tingle of excitement in the back of my mind. You haven't killed me. You made the room comfortable for me. You're going to bring me food. It makes no sense in the world why I should feel safer here than I ever have before. Maybe it's because you're the biggest nightmare on the planet, and even the horrible memories of bullies and daddy don't hold up when compared to orange eyes and black claws. When you come back, fed and having had a chance to think all this over, I have no doubt that you'll want to talk. Should I be scared? Probably a lot more than I am. Bathe. You told me to bathe. I move past an ornate writing desk and a velvet loveseat to try the glass knob of one of the doors leading off the main room.

Nope. Closet. But it's an important find. There are medical supplies in here, even a little brown bottle with the word 'morphine' printed neatly on one side. Where the hell did you get your knowledge of healing? The nineteenth century? On a shelf, folded and stacked, are fresh towels and sheets. Long dresses hang from an iron bar. Boots are lined up below. A basket holds soap, lotion, a silver-backed hairbrush. What the actual hell....you really are from a wholly different era. But somehow, I find it perfectly fitting with the rest of the strangeness that surrounds you. Did you slip off to a place like this to devour the rest of Georgie? Maybe have a nap afterwards

while you digested your meal, oblivious to the frantic shouting and searching of the little boy's family in the streets of Derry. I gather a towel, soap, a folded flannel nightgown that looks like something my great grandmother might have worn. How could something so evil create things of beauty? But then, are you really 'evil'? Do you even know what good and evil are? You are so alien. And only trying to eat, and be alive, and stay hidden. Are wolves and bears and crocodiles evil? They've eaten people too. Are you more animal than human?

I don't know. And my brain is too fuzzy and tired to really think about it. Fuzzy.

I reach for the bottle of morphine and open it, sniffing slightly at the unfamiliar scent. Then I take a sip. It's bitter, and I make a face and put the cap back on. My mouth is tingling. Did I drink too much? It was just a sip. But I don't know anything about the serving size of medications that haven't been readily available in hundreds of years. People these days use Tylenol to cure headaches. Is there a jar of leeches or a bottle of cocaine in here someplace too?

I close the closet and carry the items with me to try another door, holding an oil lamp in my free hand. The right room this time, a bathroom that looks just as antiquated and ornamental as the bedroom. The bathtub could accommodate the same rhino that might use the bed in another more fanciful reality. I set the lamp on a side table and lean way in to plug the drain, then spin the taps until hot clean water begins to fill the porcelain basin. This isn't a bath tub. This is a small pool. But I'm beyond questioning anything anymore. The morphine is taking effect quickly, and my limbs feel heavy. I move to the window in here to look out at the dark sky and the rain, the brief flashes of lightening in the distance where the clouds lift their wings like fireflies. Whatever fairy tale I've stumbled into, I both hope and dread that you'll make me stay.

When the tub is full, I slip off my dress. Step out of the slip, peel off the pantyhose. Remove my underwear and bra, placing everything aside on the lid of the weird looking toilet with the chain dangling nearby. Well at least this is normal-sized, leading me to believe that no, you do not in fact ever have to pee. Or maybe you just don't use a toilet. Is there a massive litter box somewhere in the house? Why am

I even curious? If Bill and the others could see me now, they'd undoubtedly be horrified at the situation and perplexed at my failure to run from it. But they're not here. It's only me. And no one else is present to judge me or even note my actions and thoughts. I ease down into the bathwater until it's up to my neck, and for a few moments all I can do is close my eyes and float in the perfect deliciousness of the warmth. Heaven. This is Heaven. I hold my breath and slide under, lying on the bottom and just letting the water wash away everything. Every thought and feeling. The soreness in my body from too many nights sitting on the floor of my own bathroom rather than sleeping. Waiting through the long hours of the night for....what? Blood to spray from the drain? A shadow to cross the threshold of the door?

You were smaller that first time we truly met face to face. Closer to six and a half feet, maybe. But then, when you'd sprung from the projector in Bill's garage, you were nearly ten feet tall or more. Size is just a glamor to you, something mutable that you can adjust to any purpose. Like your appearance, like your eyes.

I don't know how long I spend in the bath, but the water is cold and my skin is wrinkled by the time I pull the plug and drain the soapy water. I step out and wrap myself in the thick towel, using it to dry my short hair. I feel like a new person, and the fear has faded completely. In fact, I'm even humming a little as I tug on the nightgown and pad over to the sink to glance at myself in the mirror above it. There's a bruise on my cheek. No idea where that came from. But the barely-forming bruises around my throat are pretty distinctive. I lift a hand to the place, measuring the difference between the length of your fingers and mine. You choked me. Hurlled me down on a broken couch and then against the bannister of the stairs. But I know what you're capable of. I was there when you fought us all at the same time and damn near won. What you've done to me since I invaded your lair and sliced up my arm seems almost gentle in comparison.

I wander into the bedroom again and kneel down to add more wood to the fire. What time is it? There's no clock in here. They had clocks back then, right? When the firelight flickers up again, I straighten and walk to the bed. It's like scrambling up a mountain. I feel tired

enough to sleep, but I don't want to. Not yet. Sick, broken, twisted thing that I am, I actually feel anticipatory excitement for your return. Not like a kid waiting for Santa. This is more like waiting for Krampus. But it is what it is, and I don't even bother trying to make mental excuses. I lie back against the pillows, staring at the shadows on the ceiling. Maybe I'll just rest my eyes...

The smell of something that makes my stomach rumble is what awakens me. I sit up abruptly, rubbing my eyes, looking around the shadowy room for you. But I don't see you. Just a smeared pizza box on the low table by the loveseat.

"Oh my God." I pull back the covers and climb out, my eyebrows drawing together in shock. "Is that blood?"

It is. It's blood, still sticky and wet. But it's just on the box, not on the warm pizza inside. Did you kill a delivery boy or something? I'm touched. I eagerly pull out a slice and take a bite, moving to sit on the velvet cushions, almost choking in my haste. It feels like days since my last meal. Maybe it has been.

"You eat like an animal."

Your soft voice, carrying just the slightest hint of a growl, comes from the shadows of the far corner. I startle a little, turning to squint in that direction, but I don't see you until you move. Crouched like a gargoyle, I can barely make out your shape. Your light colored regalia is slick and dark with gore. I swallow.

"Did you roll on the floor of a slaughterhouse or something? You're covered in blood!"

"Every room in which I eat is a slaughterhouse."

Nodding, I take another bite of food. Chewing slowly. Bothered a little by the fact that I'm not bothered a lot.

"Want me to draw you a bath? The tub is huge enough for..."

I trail off as you shift into the light, orange eyes on me. A three-inch tongue extends from your jaws to lap at the bloody streaks on one gloved hand. Ooooooooookay. Catlike, you groom yourself for a few

minutes. I finish my pizza and reach for another slice.

"Did you seriously just offer to bathe me."

"I...I guess so."

"There is no physician in the world who could heal your mental sickness, Beverly." Aloof and dismissive. But not mocking. Almost casually, you rise to your feet and claw off the ruffled collar, dropping it with a wet splat on the stone near the fireplace.

You have my full attention.

"Stop it. Do not look at me as though I were a piece of meat, child, unless you wish me to do the same. And do keep in mind the fact that when I look at something as though it were meat, there is a VERY different outcome."

"How come you weren't like this when you were scaring the shit out of us five years ago?"

"Like what, precisely."

"THIS!" I point to you, then the room at large with my pizza crust. "You're like two different people! Back then you were a cackling screeching carnival nightmare! Now you're....I don't know. All cultured and stuff."

"Theatrics are more fun."

You peel off the top half of your filthy costume. I can't rip my eyes away despite your threat of a moment before. White. You're pure white even under the clothing. And there are a few scars here and there. On the wrist of your left arm is some sort of symbol. A tattoo? My puzzlement deepens. You're a huge walking, talking mystery that keeps getting more unreal with each passing moment. Glaring at me, you tug off your gloves and flex your claws. They extend, and then retract. Another catlike aspect. Not for the first time, I wonder what in the hell you really are.

"I do not normally bathe. There is no point to it. Who, exactly, is there to impress or disgust? Any of your kind that are unlucky

enough to even catch sight of me are usually not long for this world. But for your sake, little morsel, I shall clean myself. I do not require assistance. Your distasteful coulrophilia is not something I wish to encourage. Were you not so advanced in years, I would assume it was the hormonal unrest of puberty coupled with post traumatic stress brought on by my consumption of that stuttering idiot's little brother and the fallout afterwards."

I blink. "Did you eat a thesaurus?"

"No. Just a five year old." You disappear into the bathroom, firmly closing the door, while I try to decipher what you just said.

"What's coulrophilia?"

Was that a sigh? Hard to tell through the door.

"Attraction to clowns. You used the term teratophile earlier, I assumed you'd researched other sick fetishes as well."

I get up from the loveseat, feeling insulted but strangely amused at the same time. You're actually TALKING to me! I'm having a conversation with Pennywise! I rest my cheek against the door, listening to you splash water on yourself. Should I be running? You just admitted to killing a child. Tonight. And probably a pizza deliveryman too.

"You know that's kink-shaming."

No answer. You don't even dignify the comment with a response. I press a little harder to the door, closing my eyes. You're really white, and the color is all over. Like a marble statue of a demon come to life. You didn't bring any clothes in there with you. Are you going to saunter out wrapped in a towel?

The door opens, and I topple against you with a gasp. Looking up at you and holding my breath. Waiting for you to explode in anger, maybe throw me across the room. Or unhinge your jaws and dazzle me into unconsciousness, my feet lifting off the floor and my eyes glazing over.

You do none of these things. Fully dressed in a clean costume

conjured from thin air, you look down at me with annoyance.

"Are you trying to die?"

"N-no. I'm just.....not afraid of you."

"You will be. Are we really having this conversation again? Move aside, or I will bite your hands off."

"No you won't."

As though I weighed less than a sack of flour, you lift me off the ground by my shoulders and set me down to one side, moving past me into the room. I can't tell if you're angry or not. You always seem angry.

"Sit. Eat. We need to talk, you and I."

Slowly, I sink down onto the sofa again. You drop to your haunches on the other side of the table, and we eye one another across the bloody pizza box. There's a long pause while the fire crackles in the hearth and the rain pounds the windows.

"You are not as stupid as the rest of your kind. You have already realized that, for whatever reason, I don't want to hurt you. That does not mean I can't. It simply means I am not inclined to do so. This leaves me in rather an odd position. Unwilling to kill you, but unable to let you go. Humans live eight decades or more, barring some illness or accident. That is a very long time to put up with your presence. Especially for a creature who wishes to be left alone."

"I didn't expect you to let me live. I thought you were going to kill me."

"Beverly." My name on your tongue is uncomfortably, almost unbearably melodious. "Why do you want to die at all? You lived. You escaped. You left my hunting grounds. Your life could have gone on normally until old age claimed you. But you returned to this place that holds so few good memories for you. Why?"

I open my mouth to speak. Then close it again. Oh no. Not now. But there's no stopping it. Tears are welling up in my eyes and there's a

lump in my throat that I can't get a single sound out around. I wipe at my face with the cuff of this ridiculously voluminous nightgown and try to calm down.

"Because I can't live with everything that happened. Not just you. All of it. Daddy. All of it, all of the shit and the pain and the bad things. I barely sleep. I barely eat. I'm sick of waking up every two hours in a cold sweat. I don't want to do this anymore. And I didn't want to just die some stupid and pointless death. I needed closure. You're closure."

That cold, intelligent gaze holds no judgment or pity. You simply listen. And I couldn't put into words if I wanted to how much it means to me. I draw a shaky breath, and go on.

"Things like you aren't supposed to exist. Monsters aren't real. I mean, they are...but they're always human. You aren't. You were this chilling mystery that my friends and I spent a summer chasing. And being chased by. And that was the best summer of my life. Yeah, I got away. I left. I would have been ok living with my Aunt and Uncle. But the dreams would have followed me for the rest of my life. Until I was old enough to drink myself into oblivion every night and probably die early and miserable."

"What did you dream, child?"

There's a tenderness to your voice for a moment. Or maybe I imagined it. I wipe my eyes again and sigh.

"I would dream that Daddy was chasing me. Or that he'd caught me. I'd dream of falling, of floating. I dreamed about blood fountaining out of the sink and sucking me back with it. I dreamed about you a lot. Always you, just about every night. Sometimes in my dreams, I was the one you'd caught underground, not Bill. I was the one in your claws when you offered to let the others go and just keep me. Only in those dreams, instead of staying and fighting the others would accept, and leave us alone."

Your lips part, the fangs visible now, and I am mesmerized at the sight of the tip of your tongue testing one sharp point.

"You were scarred by the past, nothing more. The dreams would have ceased in time."

"But they didn't. And after awhile, I don't know. You stopped being some hideous specter of the past and became a terrible and beautiful miracle that I wanted to see again. My only doorway out. I did try to kill myself with pills, you know. About two years ago. But I must not have taken enough, because I woke up with a killer headache a few hours later and my clothes were covered in vomit."

More silence as you ponder this, your claws lightly kneading the soft carpet. Many years from now I will come to understand that you make biscuits with your hands on anything soft when you're full and content, and the fact will make you even more endearing to me. But for now, I notice it only in some abstract way. There is a sudden bang against the window and I jump, looking toward the sound.

"Calm yourself. It is only the birch tree outside, moving with the wind. I assure you, nothing will menace you here. The ghosts even avoid this place."

"There's....such a thing as ghosts?"

For the first time, you grin at me.

"The universe holds more wonder and terror in it than your mind can comprehend, little one. Alright, very well. So you came here because you cannot heal from your past experiences, and you wished me to end your life. Where does the strange attraction come into the picture? I gave you no reason whatsoever to find me beautiful. This entire form is designed to elicit terror and revulsion. Not inspire brave young girls to swoon."

"You'll just pick on me."

"Fine. I shall simply read it in your mind later." You rise to your feet and stride to a bureau, opening the top to reveal a few crystal bottles and smooth glass ones. Selecting a vessel, you bring it back to me with a glass, effortlessly jabbing at the cork with a long-nailed finger to draw it out, and pour white wine into the cup you then hand to me. "Drink. It will steady your nerves while you listen."

I take the glass and smell it first, then accept a few small swallows of the not-unpleasant wine inside.

"You left your Aunt and Uncle's home in Portland to return here. Everyone knows this, I am assuming. You found me. A portion of what you were looking for. And now you know that you imagined nothing of what transpired the summer of your fourteenth year. I did great harm to you. You and the rest of the awful brats who followed that little fool on his mad quest to defeat me."

"I'm sorry." It's barely a whisper. My eyes are riveted to your face. Even when you're furious, there's something deeply arresting about your gaze. You draw breath in a hiss, fangs showing clearly now.

"I don't care how sorry you are. It will never be forgotten. And all of you should pay. But you, Beverly. You came to me this time. Seeking death, letting me make the decision as to what I should do with you. That changes things. You will be comfortable enough here while I consider the matter. But let there be no illusions; I am not keeping you because I particularly like you. I am keeping you because I need time to think, and you fascinate me."

I nod, my heart seeming to hold its breath.

"You fascinate me too, Pennywise." There's something almost forbidden about saying your name. We were always so careful not to speak it, as though uttering the three syllables could conjure you from the shadows to attack us.

"Come here." It's not a request. You don't make requests. Immediately I get up and move cautiously around the table. Even when you're crouching and I'm standing, you're still big enough that we are eye to eye. Slowly, I kneel down to sit on the floor next to you. This close, all the little details of your physical form come clear. The bells, red and gold, are sewn under ruffles at your elbows and wrists, and around the ruffled ankles of the costume. I reach out and touch one, hearing that menacing jingle sound softly in the stillness. The Nightmare of Neibolt Street, right here beside me. So close that I can feel you breathing.

As you did those many years ago, you sniff me. And I close my eyes

and hold still for the olfactory inspection until you've finished.

Your claws click on the table when you reach for the wine glass, so small and fragile in your hand. I open my eyes to see you calmly taking a sip, watching me.

"You can eat and drink normal food?"

"I can eat and drink anything, curious human. How very full of questions you are."

My cheeks feel hot. You didn't attack me for touching your bell. Does that mean it's alright to touch you? Maybe if I don't get my hands too close to your mouth...

So of course, being a brave fool of the first order, I reach right for your face to touch the red line on your left cheek. You don't jerk away. Your eyes narrow, but you allow this small exploration. Your skin is smooth here, soft and warm. I touch your hair, and it's as wild and coarse as a horse's mane. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. The ruffled collar is clean, freshly manifested, and the satin regalia beneath it feels thick and decadent, pale gray as cloudcover. I'm mesmerized, maybe a little too much so, because the next words out of my mouth even startle me.

"If I tried to kiss you, would you bite me?"

"Yes."

"I-I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

You thrust the wineglass into my hand and move back, putting a little distance between us.

"Because you are tired, and out of your wits with the emotional and physical exhaustion of going too long without proper food or rest. Sleep. You will have a clearer head in the morning."

I look down to your belt, where you'd tucked my doll after I gave her to you. But she's gone. I wonder if you hid her away someplace special, or just tossed her on the midden heap deep underground beneath us. My eyes turn toward the bed, then back to you.

"Where will you be while I sleep? We could share the bed if you want."

"Heart of the Void, child! What dream are you living in?!"

Stung, I fall silent. When you say nothing further I get up and meekly make my way to the bed to climb in. Once nestled under the heavy covers, I roll onto my side to look at you again. What terror this sight would bring some kid in the middle of the night. Waking up to find you crouched on the floor only a few feet away. My eyelids feel heavy. I blink them, fighting against the sleep. But I'm warm and my stomach is full for the first time in a long time. The terrible aching tension is gone from my chest. It's done. I came to find you, and find you I did. Now you're here. Whatever happens from this moment forward, I'm at peace with it.

"Will you at least be someplace nearby? I don't want to have any nightmares."

"I AM the nightmare, little daydreaming fool."

"But will you stay? I don't want to sleep unless you stay."

"Fine. I will be in the corner. You will see my eyes."

I smile, blinking slower now. And with a sigh I allow the lids to close and the sweet comfort of sleep to begin its work.

"Good night, Nightmare."

A pause, and the low growl of annoyance. But then...words.

"Good night," You say softly, reluctantly, "Dream."

8. Chapter 8

Chapter Eight: Melting

I sleep like the dead that night.

The mattress is absolutely perfect, not too firm or too soft, and it seems to cradle my body and soothe the sorest parts. A few times, my eyes would open in the room to blurrily half-focus on flickering firelight, lit oil lamps still burning, and a massive shadowy figure in the corner. It's well after midnight when my bladder wakes me up, and I slip out of bed to wobble past you to the bathroom. What a bizarre, antique toilet. But it works. I yank on the chain to flush it, and wash my hands in the dark.

When I emerge, I don't return to the big warm bed just yet. It feels wrong somehow, with you here in this cold corner. I'm half asleep, groggy and tousle-haired. Gently, I put a hand on your arm.

"Please."

Just the one word. It's all that I can really muster. Maybe there's some kind of magic that suffuses the wee hours of the morning, the dark and the warmth before a blue dawn breaks and casts the world into stark reality again. Whatever it is, whatever compels you to follow me even though you're growling and aggravated, it leads to my pulling back the covers and climbing into the bed just to scoot all the way to the center. The whole mattress creaks under your weight as three hundred plus pounds of man-eating clown climbs up after me. You're sulking about it. Everything in you is urging you to claw me to ribbons and crush my skull in your hands...and you don't.

I curl up on my side, looking at you. Certain that I'm dreaming now. Because the beautiful monster is here beside me, on top of the covers but in the same bed. Only a foot away or so. We don't speak. I reach for your hand and find it, and though you jerk away at first...I clasp my small fingers around your glove. It comes off neatly when you pull your hand away, and I drop it and reach for the white hand with the black-tipped fingers and the razor sharp claws once more. This time, you snarl at me. But you don't pull away. I fall asleep again

clinging to your hand.

And that's how I wake up. To a room awash in sunlight, my fingers wrapped around your thumb, my eyes opening to look straight into yours. You don't appear happy. At all.

"Um...good morning." I yawn, releasing your hand. You immediately tug on your glove, as miffed as a cat whose tail has been trodden on.

"The next human I hunt will suffer dearly for the aggravation you insist on causing me."

All that rest and the food beforehand must have worked wonders in me, because I don't feel the roiling discomfort of tension and fear and sorrow and hesitation in my chest and stomach. If anything, I feel fantastic. I move closer to you, attempting to cuddle, and only flinch a little when you snap your jaws a fraction of an inch from my face. My eyes close again, cheek resting on your shoulder while you lie stiffly nearby and all but ripple with anger. I put a hand on your chest, but that's all. Pushing my luck any further would be suicide. And suddenly, that's the last thing on my mind. You smell good, like cotton candy and peppermint ice cream and popcorn. The persona of the White Clown is perfect down to the most minute detail. This might be both the most bizarre and wrong moment of my life as well as the most fitting and greatest moment. I hold still. You hold still. Outside, the birds are already chirping in the birch tree.

"Are there more of your kind?"

"I ate them."

"Even the girls?"

"We are not a species that is fully one or the other."

"So you're the last one of your whole species?"

"Not exactly."

My fingers close over a dark orange pompom on the front of your costume, and I stroke its softness.

"Where do you come from?"

"The Macroverse. You ask a great many questions for a broken little girl with a death wish."

Before I can stop myself, I snap back at you.

"If you're going to kill me, I can't stop you! I'm done running. And you fed me and gave me somewhere to sleep. You came to bed when I needed you to. I don't know how this is going to end. I don't know what you're going to do to me. But I'm not going to fight you and I'm done trying to figure out ways to hurt you or defeat you! Alright? Just...do what you're going to do. Until you tear my head off or eat my heart or whatever, I'm going to do what I'm going to do! And I want to touch you and ask you questions!"

This time, your growl is like thunder. With an abrupt shove, you push me away and sit up, the pillow in your hands, and as I sit up too and rub the sleep from my eyes you shred the fabric and feathers viciously with your claws and teeth. Throwing the pieces to the floor in rage. Feathers everywhere, still floating down around us from the tempest of your angry destruction. My eyes are wide. I don't try to touch you, not when you're breathing harder and your stare is the color of fresh blood. Teeth bared, saliva shining on your lips, your black claws still twitching on the pieces of the pillow in your hands.

For a long time, you glare at me while I clutch the blankets to my chest and try to steady my heartbeat.

Then you move off the bed, your back to me, the intricate woven braid down your back raised slightly like the spine of an agitated animal.

"I am going hunting."

"Pennywise...."

"SILENCE. You are an intrusive, skinny wreck of a human not even worth devouring! I would cast you out into the gutter if it were not so perilously close to my domain! Insolent, worthless little sow!"

Tears spring to my eyes, and I cover my face. Suddenly overcome

with sobs. I cry because of everything, the harshness of your words and my own tangled emotions and the trauma of not even knowing what to do, how to feel, where to go. When I lift my head again, feathers sticking to my wet cheeks and catching in my hair, the room is empty. And that just makes me cry more.

It takes me an hour to muster the will to go into the bathroom and wash my red face. I undress and take another bath, intermittently weeping and angrily wiping away the tears. What the hell did I even expect? Compassion? From you? Your hatred of me and my whole species drips from every word you say. You feed on us! The fact that I'm not dead yet is the most mercy I should expect. That wasn't cuddling last night. It was tempting fate, pushing you to your limits and damn near getting myself killed in the process. I feel embarrassed and sad and sick and angry and hopeless.

I'm still rubbing away the occasional tear two hours later as I clean feathers and torn silk from the floor and the bed. Dumping the ruined pillow into the wastebasket by the desk. When the mess is gone, I make the bed and open the wardrobe to find something to wear. Long, stupid Victorian dresses. I pull out the least ridiculous garment I can find, a pale lavender dressing gown, and pull it on.

Will you even come back? Should I try to leave? Do you want me to go? You told me not to leave the house. But that was before I disrespected you. Have things changed? Should I make a run for it and not stop until I'm back in Portland? I don't even know. I don't know anything.

When hunger finally tugs at me with its discomfort, I eat a few pieces of cold pizza and wash it down with wine. A lot of wine. I've been drunk before, a couple times. But never on anything this nice. After drinking half the bottle, I calm down a little. Just a tiny bit. Enough to take the edge off and stop my tears. Miserably, I search through the room, finding all the items you manifested here for me. Looking for some hint that you have any emotions apart from anger and annoyance. Warm socks, underthings, books from another era. A painting on the wall of ships at sea. What does any of this mean? I kneel by the fireplace and pick up the crusty blood-caked ruffled collar you dropped there last night. And I carry it to the bathroom and draw some water into the sink, soaking the stained fabric to

loosen the gore. Scrubbing at it with the creamy white bar of soap over and over until the stains begin to fade. At least it gives me something to do. I hang it to dry on a sill, opening the window above the desk to let in the fresh afternoon breeze.

You're still not back when the sun is directly overhead. Not back when it begins its descent into the west. I eat the rest of the pizza and rip up the bloody cardboard to throw into the fire. I drink the other half of the bottle of wine. My head hurts, so I drink a little morphine too. More time passes. I take a nap, waking every so often to look at the empty corner. I consider leaving. When the sun begins to set, I consider it a whole lot more.

Finally, after dark, I dare to open the door to the hallway and step out into the musty, decrepit reality beyond the illusion you created for me. I hesitate in the doorway for what seems an eternity before closing it again and going back to the loveseat. And I just sit there. My hands in my lap. Waiting. Not moving. Desolate and confused, but resolute. You will return at some point. And you'll find me here when you do. I lie down when I'm tired of sitting, curled into the fetal position against the crushed velvet cushions. I'm hungry, but there's no more food. That's alright. I've been hungry before. I can go days. Drifting in and out of troubled sleep for a little while, I finally succumb fully to the emotional void that's been looming on the edge of my thoughts since I snapped at you sixteen hours ago.

When I wake up again, the room is cold and dark and I have no idea what time it is. The fire went out. The lamps ran out of fuel. I don't have the energy to do anything about it. So I lie in the darkness and listen to the trees moving in the wind outside.

Some time later, the stairs creak out there beyond the hallway. I sit up, heart hammering in my chest, and stare into the pitch black. God it's cold. If I could see anything at all, it would be my breath rising in tendrils of steam from my lips. But I see nothing. Not even when the door eases open and then closes again. Any normal, sane person would be terrified. But I feel only relief. I reach up blindly, both arms extended, and when my fingertips encounter satin I clumsily get up and press closer. Fumbling to find your shape, to stand on tiptoe and put my hands on your shoulders, tears running down my cheeks. I don't have anything to say. I just don't want you to go again. I don't

want to make you angry. I don't want to be broken anymore. I know I will never be whole...but I at least want the pain to stop.

And miraculously, there are clawed hands on my back a moment later. I burst into fresh sobs at the contact, burying my face in your chest. You stand still as a statue until I calm down a little.

"My presence is supposed to frighten you. Not bring you tears of relief."

I can't even whisper. I just nod, clutching you tighter. And I can feel you sigh deeply.

The fire blazes to life behind me. Lamps lighting themselves, replenished with oil. In the illumination, I open my eyes to find you covered in blood again, as you were the last time you hunted. It's everywhere, viscous and dark and awful. Even smeared on my face where I rubbed it on your shirt. Your crimson eyes are trained on me, watching my reaction. At least you're not snarling, your teeth aren't bared. But you're not smiling either. I do the only thing I can do, the only thing that seems right to do. I take both your gloved and sticky hands in mine and silently pull you toward the bathroom.

And you follow.

The water is blessedly hot after the long chill of my isolation. I fill the tub and then turn to look up at you, a question in my eyes. When you don't move, I loosen the belt of the soiled dressing gown I'm wearing and slowly drop it to the floor. Still, you don't move. So I step into the tub alone to wash away the blood. Letting you make your own choice whether to join me or not.

"You are very damaged, Beverly. This is not a healthy or safe obsession."

"I know. I don't care."

"If you continue down this path, you will end up even more damaged."

"That's fine by me. It can't get any worse."

"Yes it can."

I tilt my head back to wet my hair, and when I come up again I blink the water from my eyes and look at you. Quiet now, just watching. You could be anything at all, take any shape in the world. But you choose to stay in this form, as this immense Thing wearing the guise of a clown. In a clown's attire, with a clown's painted face and a clown's crazed hair and a clown's red nose. But you are as much a clown as I am a Victorian damsel. And dressed in our bloody lies, we eye one another across a chasm that can never be crossed. You will live forever, and you are not broken. I won't last a century, and I'm a thousand jagged pieces that are bright with fleeting mortal life.

The oil lamp in the bathroom flickers, and goes out. In the dark, there is the soft rustle of satin and the jingle of bells. With an easy grace that is completely at odds with your size, you step into the water and settle on the other side of the tub, invisible. I don't try to touch you. I just listen to the gentle splashing and feel the ripples of something huge in the water with me. The strangeness of this moment is beautiful. When I feel your claws on my shoulder, I don't move forward or pull away. I move in the direction of your push, turning my back to you. And when you cup water in your large hands and pour it across my skinny shoulders I lower my head and sigh with pleasure. Of course I can't handle you. I know that. Nothing alive could. But I'm at peace with that. I accept it the way a mouse accepts the talons of the owl in the instant before death. There has always been a natural rhythm to my life, a pendulum swinging between moments of precarious happiness and moments of horrible pain and suffering. I've sought out the biggest monster in the world and handed him the pendulum now. There's so much relief in just letting go and letting the choices fall on you instead. A pet, a slave, a morsel, a Dream, a sow...whatever you name me, that's what I'll be. I'm too tired and too injured to be anything else.

But your hands are careful on my back as you lather the soap against my skin. I hold still as you wash me, then my hair. I wait for some sign that you'll allow me to return the favor, but it doesn't come. Clearly there is a boundary you aren't willing to cross yet.....if ever. When you've rinsed me, you rise to your feet with a great churning of the water. I stand too, your hand on my wrist pulling me up. You step

out of the tub. I do too. A towel is wrapped around me, huge hands patting me dry. Pulling a fresh nightgown over my head. I raise my face in the darkness just in case you want to kiss me, but no such contact comes. Your hands on my shoulders turn me firmly away from you, and guide me back into the dimly lit bedroom. Without speaking, I walk to the bed and climb in. You don't follow, and when I roll onto my side I can see you in your corner. Eyes gleaming in the dark.

"Your wrist...."

"What about it."

"You have a symbol on it. Like a tattoo. What does it mean?"

You wait a bit before answering, but when you speak there's no annoyance this time. Perhaps I am not the only one who has resigned herself to this situation.

"Deimos. It is the name I keep for myself. Pennywise is what my prey calls me. What the mewling wretched masses of humanity know me as in the moments before I kill them. You know I am not a clown. I am not human. I am nothing you can ever understand."

"I don't have to understand you to love you."

"You do not know the meaning of the word. Be still, Dream. I am allowing you more than I have ever allowed anyone or anything."

So it's Dream, then. I didn't imagine that last night. You really did call me by a nickname. I prop my head up on one hand, not tired at all now that you're back.

"I'm a little hungry." I tell you, and you huff out a sigh and vanish. The air molecules rushing in to fill the void with a soft 'pop'. Less than five minutes later you're back, and a grocery bag is dropped on the floor at your feet, tipping over to let an apple roll out. I pull back the covers and come over to you to collect the food. No blood this time, although I know better than to imagine you strolled into the supermarket to purchase some provisions. It's probably best not to ask where this came from. I dig through the bag, finding more fruit,

some bread, a container of orange juice and a whole roasted chicken. It's still hot. I look up at you, trying to fight down a laugh.

"Did you steal this from some mewling wretch of humanity?"

"Yes."

"You could just let me go shopping, you know."

"You are hungry. There is food. Eat."

I sit on the floor by the table and pry open the box of chicken while you settle into your corner again. Watching me, always watching.

"Can I call you Deimos?"

"You have not earned that privilege yet. Be grateful that I even told you."

"What about Nightmare?"

After pondering the question for a moment, you nod slightly.

"If you must. It's accurate, after all."

I rip off chunks of meat and eat them, pausing to take a few swallows of juice from time to time.

"I have never actually watched a human eat before."

"No? Come to think of it, I've never watched you eat either."

This time there's no mistaking your soft laughter.

"Be careful what you wish for."

I smile, tucking another piece of chicken into my mouth. It's macabre as hell to find that funny, but somehow it appeals to me. What do I care of you eat the whole town? The only people who were ever nice to me have all moved away. Well, except Mike. But I didn't know him as well as the others. I hold out a drumstick, offering it to you.

"Come on. Just try a little."

"You are not hand-feeding me, Beverly. Just because I was kind to you in the washroom does not mean you have tamed me."

My grin vanishes, and I lower my hand.

"I'm sorry. That's not what I meant. I just....God I feel stupid and awkward around you. And nervous about saying or doing the wrong thing."

"You were hardly this coy when you were shoving an iron spike through my eye."

"I'm REALLY sorry about that."

"Save it. Battles are never pretty things. I made a series of tactical errors that will never be repeated. Your friends, the moment they set foot in Derry again, are dead. I will not eat them in front of you, as a courtesy. But I will have my revenge."

Suddenly not hungry anymore, I close the box again and set the food on the table. I wipe my lips with the back of my hand and get up to slip into the bathroom. Gripping the sink to steady myself. There's never going to be a way to get around the horrible eventuality that you just mentioned. You're going to fight them again if they return. And what will I do when that happens? I can't watch another vicious gang-beating like what happened underground near your tower. My feelings for you are too complicated. But they're my friends. Bill is almost more than that. Ben wishes desperately to be. I turn on the tap and rinse my mouth, splash my face, hold the cold water to my eyes for a moment just to clear my vision.

When I look up, you're right behind me. Reflected in the mirror, leaning over my shoulder.

"Whose side will you be on then, I wonder." Your voice is a dark hiss.

I turn around, and before you can straighten up again my hands are on your cheeks and I'm pressing my lips against yours. Hard.

I can't read minds. I don't know your history. But at the moment of contact I'm suddenly one hundred percent sure that you've never been kissed before. You only freeze in shock for a heartbeat before

gripping my short hair in one clawed hand and violently smashing my back to the wall beside the sink. This isn't the brief peck I'd intended. In the span of time it takes to form the words 'uh-oh', I'm being deeply and thoroughly kissed by a creature whose understanding of the word passion is all-encompassing. Your teeth sink into my tongue just enough to draw blood which your own tongue licks away a moment later. I struggle against the steel embrace that pins me against the painted tiles, my feet lifted off the floor. And then my arms are around your neck and I'm trying to give as good as I'm getting. Letting you in, INVITING you in, and not shying away from this raw and bloody expression of desire. Not hiding from who and what you are, showing you that yes...I will bleed for you. I will accept the beast, accept the monster, accept the clown, accept the It in a way no human ever has before or will again. Claws tear down my back, shredding the nightgown and grazing my skin underneath. This is what it is to be mauled by a tiger. I dig my nails into your back too, and bite down on your lower lip with a tiny growl of my own. Only to be met with the deep bass of yours. The ornate wall sconce beside me is knocked from its cylindrical holder and shatters on the floor. Pulling me away from the shards, your claws tangle in the curtain. We rip it down together under our weight, tumbling to the floor where I am pinned beneath you. I tear futilely at your costume, unable to make the tiniest rip, until your hands slam my wrists to the floor hard enough to bruise them. I'm breathless under your weight, kissing you desperately, ready for this to go all the way to its potentially life-threatening finish.

But just as abruptly as it began, you break off the exchange. Releasing my hands and lifting your weight off me, your arms slowly straightening on either side of my head until you are looking down at me in the moonlight pouring through the exposed window. There's blood on your lips and blood on mine. We are both out of breath, both stunned, each eyeing the other cautiously. I test my tongue against the roof of my mouth, checking the damage. Seems to still be all in one piece. You lick your lips, blinking down at me with eyes that have gone a dangerous and glorious orange. Gently, you bring the fingers of one hand to my mouth and wipe away the blood on my chin.

I take a deep breath when you roll off of me and haul me to my feet.

But I don't let go of you, and you don't push me away. I'm shaking. My knees won't hold my weight. You pick me up easily enough, and carry me over the broken glass and out of the bathroom, depositing me on the bed. There's something almost docile about you now. It takes me a minute to realize that you're exerting a considerable amount of self-control to hold yourself in check. Not docile....disciplined. I move over to make room for you. But you stop me.

"Don't be a fool. That was merely a kiss, and you can barely stand. You have no idea of the danger you're inviting."

"I trust you."

"If that is true, then listen to my words. You will never rise from this bed again if I give in to what you wish. You are fragile, and I am not built for tenderness. I am built for exquisite and complete destruction."

"I'm not afraid. I want you."

"Hush." Your voice drops to the softest, gentlest murmur I have ever heard from you, the anger gone. "Hush, Dream. Sleep. Your body needs sleep more than anything else. Rest. I will be nearby."

"Can you just...can't you hold me?" The pleading tone in my voice sounds pathetic to my own ears, but you don't look at me with pity. After hesitating for a few seconds, you lower yourself to the bed beside me. On top of the covers again, but here, close, and you accept me when I curl up tightly against your side. One thick arm around me, your gloved hand on top of mine on your chest. In silence, we lie in the warm room and are sleepless together, both hungry for something we can't even express. Only my hunger is just uncomfortable. Yours is and always has been deadly.

"What's going to happen with us?" I finally whisper.

"I do not know."

"Do you want me too?"

"I am a solitary creature."

"Have you ever been with anyone?"

"Been with'. What a delicate term for the mating act. Are you asking me if I am a virgin?"

"I guess. Yeah."

"I have never mated. Why would I bother, when your kind are useless for such things, and my kind are gone."

I'm quiet then, cuddled against you and feeling the wonderful warm weight of your hand on top of mine. I don't want to ruin the moment by asking too many more questions. It seems like the wrong time to seek answers. Your body is huge and solid near me. You don't growl or swat me when I slip my fingers under the ruffled collar to touch the skin of your throat. I push it back, finding the way in, and lean up as much as I can to press a kiss to your neck.

"Beverly." Your voice is a warning. I shimmy down under the covers again, holding still. Just lying here with you and trying to match my breathing to yours.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?"

"I am doing nothing. You will be returning to your home to gather what supplies you require and to leave a note telling of your extended absence. If you do not return before nightfall, I will hunt you down."

"I thought you weren't going to ever let me go again! You said you couldn't!"

"That has changed. I trust you to return to this place in short order. Do you intend to flee?"

"Well....no."

"Good. Then we have an understanding. You will pack your things and make your way back here without being seen or followed. Do not make me come after you, child. I am in no mood."

"I won't. I mean, I will. Return, that is. I won't make you come after

me. Sir."

"Go to sleep."

I can't keep the smile from my bruised and bitten lips. Whatever is going to happen, it's started already. You're holding still here against me for the second time in as many nights. And the kiss...

"That was amazing. In the bathroom."

You don't respond, but your hand tightens on top of mine for the briefest of moments. And in a little while, still thinking about your kiss, I fall asleep.

9. Chapter 9

Chapter 9: Return

Morning brings a wash of sunlight filtering through the broken curtain in the bathroom, and the reflected glow illuminates the bedroom with soft yellow light. I rise to wakefulness slowly. My hand is still on your chest, your hand still on top of mine, your arm still around me. I wonder if you moved a muscle at all during the night. Not speaking yet, I move my hand up to your shoulder and hug you. When you don't growl at me, I feel for your face and lightly touch your cheek.

Still no negative reaction. I have all my fingers and my head is still attached to my shoulders, the rhythm of your breathing steady. And that's what gives me pause. I slowly lean up onto one elbow, looking at you. Your eyes are closed, mouth just slightly open, the wicked gleam of your teeth showing. Are you actually.....sleeping?

Pennywise sleeps? Like any other living creature? A catnap only, because you hibernate for 27 years at a time. But you're a predator. Wouldn't your instincts have awakened you the moment I moved? Are you slipping into hibernation now? You were supposed to already be asleep for what you referred to as the Long Rest. But your injuries kept you awake. Maybe you've finally succumbed to the hibernation? I don't know. I know nothing about your physiology. I barely know anything about you at all.

Gently, I stroke your cheek. Staring at you with the kind of chest-tingling, tummy-warming love that only a childish crush on a rock star could inspire. How could I have ever thought you were ugly? The demarcation lines on your cheeks are smooth and perfect, your lips full and soft and red. White skin, the preternaturally broad forehead, your fire colored hair. I know this is twisted and deviant and sick. I know that Bill and the others would be disgusted and horrified if they knew. But I can't seem to help myself.

I lean over you, still petting your cheek, and am struck with almost unbearable adoration when I detect the faintest sound of a purr under your breath. You hiss, snarl, claw, bristle, and purr. You crouch like a

cat, groom yourself like a cat. And to me it is the most precious thing in the world. Strange, beautiful, horrifying, dangerous, wonderful beast. I close my eyes and kiss you. Soft and tender, the kind of kiss I've only bestowed on one other person in my entire life; your enemy. But that's just it. He is your enemy. I'm not. I don't want to be. I want this, this right here. The sweet kiss in the morning after a night cuddled up together, the quiet vibration of your purr under my palm on your chest, my other hand on your cheek feeling the warmth of your skin. There's no biting this time, no out of control passion, no threat. Just the most delicate.....

With a snort, you abruptly awaken. And before I can pull away, there are claws shooting into my shoulder and side with an awful sting that makes me cry out. The pain is horrible, made all the worse when you jerk your hands away and withdraw the stabbing talons. I collapse back on the bed, my hands going to the injured places to protectively cover them.

"Stupid girl! What did you think would happen?!"

You are up on your knees in under a second, your strong hands on mine, pulling them away from the wounds to inspect them. I'm whimpering in pain, trying to twist away from you and failing. So immersed am I in the agony that I don't even notice you pulling apart my nightgown over my side. But the warm wetness of your tongue on the gouges relieves the stinging almost immediately. My moaning trails off in shock at the sudden relief. When you shift your weight to lap at the blood on my neck, I sniffle and hold still, closing my eyes. You keep grooming me until the pain dulls to a throb, then vanishes completely. When you are finished, rather than continuing to berate me, you pull me into your arms and cradle me like a small child. The purr has vanished, replaced with an annoyed growl that ends in a huffed sigh. I hold onto a fistful of your costume tightly, trying to will this moment to last longer. You don't apologize. You don't make any excuse for what you are or for what you did to me. But you lower your head and nuzzle my temple with your red nose for a moment, and that's everything I need. I reach up for your face again, touching your cheek. You grumble a little.

"Aggravating food."

"You said I wasn't worth eating."

"You are not worth eating. That does not negate your status as food."

"Do you always heal your food instead of chew it?"

"Shut up, Beverly. For once, just shut up."

"I love you."

"No you don't. You are unwell, and need medication."

"Were you sleeping?"

"I was simply resting, not truly asleep. You are lucky I was not asleep. I devour the first living thing near me when I awaken from the Long Rest."

"Is that what happened to Georgie?"

"He was not the first thing I ate at that particular waking. I'd eaten four others before he stumbled right into my claws. Do not bring it up again, you will only become upset and say something we will both regret."

I settle down, actually doing what you tell me for once. But I don't stop touching you. Finally, when you've had enough, you nip lightly at my fingers and lay me aside before rising to your feet.

"You will go to your home and do what we discussed last night. Be back by sundown."

"What will you do while I'm away?"

"Brood in the sewers, perhaps hunt a little. It is not your concern. I may watch you to see what you do and who you speak with. That's the beauty of it....you will simply not know."

I shiver pleasantly, delighted at the prospect of being watched. Funny, to feel this way when I used to hope against hope that you were far away from me. I scoot to the edge of the bed and slip out, my feet hitting warm soft carpet instead of bare boards. Rested and

content, ridiculously so. Yes, I'm mentally sick. Fine. After my upbringing and all the things I've been through, is it really a shock? I pad after you as you move about the room, still prattling on imperiously.

"Will you spend the night with me tonight again?"

"If I am not hunting."

"Did you like last night?"

No reply. You've crept to the window, and are even now pushing up the sash. We're on the second floor. I put a hand on your back, leaning out with you to look down.

"You're not seriously going to jump, are you? It's broad daylight! You'll be seen!"

"As I was seen five years ago when I stalked you, ALL of you, in broad daylight?" Your voice is annoyed, but you pause to turn to me. One gloved hand under my chin to lift it. "Such touching concern. I plan to kill a human today, you know. One of your kind. They will suffer before the end. I will feast on their flesh and fear, and carry what is left below to the sewer to properly season in the fetid dark and the rot. No more autumn leaves dancing around their feet, no more summer sun on their face. I shall bite into the part of their brain that knows the name of their mother, rip away their hopes and dreams, annul their future with teeth and claws and hunger. Does that not bother you?"

I chew on my lip, feeling queasy. How broken, exactly, am I...that I can't feel anything right now? After what you've said. And I know you mean it, every word. You tower over me even while bending forward slightly like this, one hand on the sill. I reach up and smooth the ruffles of your collar.

"No. There's probably something wrong with me."

You blink at me, and your large brow furrows in aggravation. Fast becoming the most familiar emotion for me to read on your face.

"Do you think?"

It is the last thing you say before slipping out of the window with eerie grace, scrambling up the side of the house to vanish in the eaves. A moment later a large black raven takes flight from the place where you disappeared. I shade my eyes to watch you fly into the sunrise. Anything. You can become anything, And this town, this little village where the adults look away from the cruelty and the dangers and the children fear every shadow and bump in the night until they either give into madness or despair; these are your hunting grounds. Someone is going to go missing today. Maybe a child. Maybe sad posters will go up, begging for someone to come forward and return the lost one to their grieving parents. I should be disgusted and horrified. I should be in tears of frustrated anger that I can't stop you. I should be outside prying up a fence spike to stab through your head when you return. I should...I should...I should.

But instead, I open the closet and pull out a dark blue dress to shimmy into, and slip on my shoes. Back before sunset, you said. And I don't intend to be late.

I close the front door behind me and look cautiously around to make sure that no one marks my leave taking. It would be hard to explain why an almost grown woman is messing about in an abandoned house. But no one is around, just as it was five years ago. No one is looking. No one comes here to this place. Their eyes pass over it, they don't see it. The Well House doesn't exist anywhere except as a vague nightmare, and so I am able to walk away and down the cracked sidewalk without being spotted.

Home. You told me to go home and gather my things, a little mercy that I wasn't expecting. Write a note indicating my absence....like anyone at all will care. Or notice. Not now. I know what they all think of me and how they've always thought of me, I know the rumors they all spread. The town slut, the piece of shit, the little abused troublemaker who had a chance to get out and probably blew it, maybe drugs were involved. Of course that's what they'd think, what they'd always thought. Never mind the truth. In a town like this, truth is a liability.

I know the way home, of course. It takes me about fifteen minutes to arrive back at the shabby little apartment building where I'd lived for

most of my life. I climb the steps, taking them two at a time. Not that I think I'll have a hard time getting finished by my curfew with packing up my few possessions and leaving a note. A note no one will read or wonder about. There are a few desolate plants I'd bought at the market to give myself at least something alive to keep me company. I take the pots outside and set them on the porch where the sun and the rain can care for them. Not exactly setting a caged bird free...but I don't have a bird, and the symbolism is unnecessary anyway. I'm doing all this in preparation to enter a cage, not leave one. Although the more I think about it the less sure I am that that's the case here.

In the mirror over the sink in the bathroom, I pause to stare at myself as I pack up my toiletries. There's a cut on my lower lip, and it's a little swollen. I look pale and nervous and excited. My eyes are really glassy, the way they get when I haven't eaten or slept enough. Well... there's a reason. I look down at the sink again, and time seems to roll back half a decade to another moment in this very bathroom. In the tub, fully clothed and surreptitiously reading a beautiful poem from a secret admirer. The whispers from the drain, the way the porcelain had felt so cold under my hands when I pushed myself up and out of the bathtub, the catch of breathing in my throat as I approached the sink and leaned, leaned, leaned over. Trying to hear. Trying to listen with all my might to the hidden and buried voices coming from some far-off hidden and buried realm.

Then the blood. The icy cold, salty, metallic, stinking blood that gushed out of the drain like a geyser, filling my mouth and getting into my eyes, causing me to choke and gasp and scramble away as fast as I could, feet squeaking on the slick tiles, the entire bathroom like an abattoir, the scream ripped from my lips as though by force. I shudder, hugging myself. You weren't being playful and you weren't being flirtatious. That horrible experience had been a warning. A warning I had not heeded then and could not heed now. What the hell am I getting myself into? You're a monster, a fiend from the deepest pits of Hell or the blackest places between the stars, deadly and cruel and determined to destroy the only friends I've ever had.

So why did I take an extra long shower the moment I arrived? Why am I making sure to pack my perfume, my makeup, a razor to keep

my legs smooth and scented soap and shampoo to keep me smelling nice? Why am I tossing a box of condoms into my overnight bag, a box I'd bought at Keene's Pharmacy on my way into town for no discernable reason? Even if they could fit you, which I am pretty damn sure they won't, what the hell makes me think for a moment that you're interested in anything beyond snapping my limbs off to drink the marrow inside? I stare at the box. Trojans. Extra large.

"Jesus Christ, Bevie. What the hell are you even thinking?!" I whisper, and fish them out of my bag to throw them in the trash and bury them under toilet paper. Ashamed. It's not like you could impregnate me anyway, even if everything I'm terrified and hopeful about comes to pass. We aren't the same species. You would mock me mercilessly if you knew I'd bought these with some vague thought of you in the back of my mind. Even worse if you knew that I'd covered my notebooks with doodles of balloons and inane poetry. Lethal clown with fire eyes / Hold me close that I may die. / Death with you is hardly more / Than the little deaths before.

Stupid girl. Stupid sow. Stupid food.

I move into the bedroom and pack my clothes. Only the nicest ones, the panties with no rips or stains, the dresses that flatter my body the most, the shirts and leggings and boots that my Aunt bought me at the fancy outlet malls in Portland. Then it's on to the books, where I take a few actual hours to look through every title and pick out only the ones I think you might like too. Do you even read? I'm sure you know how. All those centuries studying human beings, learning our culture enough to maneuver through it. The Missing posters you synthesized to frighten Richie in the Well House all that time ago. The writing on my bedroom walls, the writing on your stage far below us in the sewer chambers. Oh yes...you can read and write just fine. I wonder if you'll let me read to you sometime.

I tuck everything I can into two suitcases, and latch them closed. I am just sitting down with a pad of paper to write the note informing anyone who may want to know that I've decided to take a road trip to clear my mind when there's a hesitant knock on the door. I am so startled by the sound that I drop the pen. Who the hell? I have no friends here, no one who might care enough to come to my house and climb the stairs and rap on the door in the hopes that I might

answer. It has to be some mistake. I'll just wait for them to....

knock, knock, knock

Dammit.

I get up from the kitchen table and make my way into the living room, hoping that it's you out there but knowing it isn't. And through the filmy white curtain that covers the glass window in the door, I see a figure that surprises me and fills me with nervousness. It's Mike Hanlon. God only knows why he's here, why he decided to drop by TODAY of all days, right now. I hesitate, then unfasten the dead bolt and open the door.

"Mike?"

His face breaks into a smile, and he moves to hug me. "Bev! I'd heard you were back in town! Sorry I haven't come to see you, I've got an internship at the public library and I'm taking classes at the community college. It's a lot to do. But I wanted to come and say hello, see how you were. Mind if I come in?"

Yeah, I do mind. You're in danger if you get too close to me, and you don't even know how much.

"Of course. Um...yeah. Come on inside if you want. For a minute anyhow. I'm in the middle of...tidying up."

I step away from the door and let him in, and he looks around the place with an air of curiosity. That's right, he's never been inside the apartment.

"So you're taking classes? That's...that's neat. Really neat. Cool."

Hands in his pockets, he stands awkwardly in the entryway and smiles and nods as I smile and nod. Just two old friends, smiling and nodding. This is excruciating.

"Library science." He explains simply. And walks boldly into the room to take a seat on the sofa, settling in like he's been here a hundred times. Reluctantly I find myself playing the proper role of hostess.

"Can I offer you something to drink? I have some orange pop and some iced tea."

"Tea would be great. Thanks, Bev."

I slip into the kitchen and quickly shove the note under the phone book, kick the suitcases beneath the table, then turn to the fridge to get out the tea. I'm reaching for two clean glasses when Mike's voice comes from the living room.

"Seen the others at all? We kind of fell out of touch."

"No. We...fell out of touch too. That happens sometimes. You're friends as kids and then when you start growing up, you just get distant. You know? Find out you don't really have a lot in common after all. People go on to school or work and they meet someone and get romantic, and you just end up forgetting the past. Happens literally all the time. I'm surprised you even remember me. Ha! Great memory though, Mike! You'll be a great librarian someday. Is that what they call the boys too? Librarians? I guess it's a gender neutral term, right? Cool career choice, you'll get to be around all those books."

I'm babbling like an idiot, trying to control my nervousness. Any second, any moment that door could give way under a massive white hand. And there would be shrieking and begging and fighting and blood. And I would have to watch you eat Mike.

I reappear in the living room with the drinks, coming to set one down in front of my old friend. I sit a little stiffly in the chair on the other side of the coffee table, just holding my own glass in my hands between my knees. Leave. Just leave. Leave, Mike. Leave while you can.

"Yeah, I guess. It's challenging but I'm having fun." There's a little silence while we drink our tea and look at each other. It's not the kind of companionable silence between friends who are comfortable and content to sit in peace and stillness. It's the kind of silence that feels as though the room is holding its breath. In about three hours, the sun will begin its descent toward the trees along the western horizon. And I have someplace to be.

"Bev. You look really good. It's great to see you." His voice is warm and friendly. Not flirtatious, just complimentary. This eighteen year old boy is genuinely happy to see me. He's remembering the good times. Swimming at the quarry. Fighting off the dirtbag town bullies together. Talking and laughing in the Barrens with stolen cigarettes and bottles of pop and comic books. He's remembering our friendship. I relax.

"Thanks. It's really great to see you too." I smile, and this time it's a real smile. I take a sip of tea and breathe out a long sigh. Letting the tension go. After all, I won't be able to have afternoons like this pretty soon. Maybe I should enjoy it while I can.

"So what's been happening? I felt bad when you had to go live in Portland. We all kind of knew that things here at home weren't ideal," a delicate way of putting it, but I could hug him for his politeness. His refusal to make me out to be a victim, and instead gloss over things I'd just as soon not discuss. "But everyone missed you when you left. I know I sent you some newspaper clippings and things like that. You never wrote back, so eventually I figured you were really busy with your new life. What was Portland like?"

And so we talk.

We talk about high school, about the proms we both went to alone because we'd been through so much that we were distanced from our peers and dating anyone our age was impossible. We talk about plans for the future, about friends and pets, about families and town gossip from years ago. We talk about how Eddie's mom had her second heart attack, and is probably going to have a third if she doesn't start getting healthy. We talk about how Greta Keene is pregnant already, not even married but she has a bun in the oven, poor unborn child. We talk about how the town has changed, what businesses are still going strong and which ones have closed their doors for good. We talk about the woods and the lakes and the best spots for fishing and the best places to camp. We talk about how he finally left the meat industry and is now devoted full time to books. We talk until our tongues are tired and we've both lost track of time, and I can't believe how natural it feels.

"So wait. Shut UP, you haven't been on a date since the eighth

grade?!" I'm laughing, and we're on our third glass of tea. Mike shakes his head, laughing with me.

"My Uncle drove me and Sally Richardson to the skating rink in his Buick. Maybe not the most romantic thing in the world, but the memory is probably going to need to last a lifetime, the way I'm going. Do you have any idea how narrow the prospects are when you're the only Black person in town? These people are still stuck in the fifties."

"Least you have some good stories to tell, that should impress a date. You can take her to any restaurant and be an unchallenged expert on every single meat on the menu!"

"Yeah, or I could take her to a circus."

All at once the laughter dies, and both of us go quiet. The clinking of the ice cubes in our glasses is the only sound until Mike clears his throat uncomfortably.

"Well hey, it's been great to see you."

"Yeah! Yeah, this was nice."

"We should do it again sometime. You can always come by the library, you know. Stop in and see me."

"Maybe I will, sure."

We are both getting to our feet, the temperature in the room seeming to have dropped by about ten degrees. I walk Mike to the door and he opens it.

"Thanks for coming by, Mike. I mean it."

"Are you kidding? Wild horses couldn't have kept me away when I heard that a Loser had come home to roost." He grins, and before I can stop him he leans in and kisses me on the cheek. Just a friendly peck, nothing romantic. But I feel a sense of foreboding immediately. If you're watching now....

"See you around."

"Yeah. Um...see you around."

And with that, I close the door before he's even started down the stairs. I turn the lock and lean against it, my eyes shut. You probably wouldn't like it if you knew that I'd spent a few hours with one of the people who tried to kill you. In fact I'm certain you wouldn't like it. I glance out through the curtains to see Mike walking away across the yard, hands in his pockets again. And it is then that the redness of the sky finally gets through to me exactly how much time has passed.

"SHIT! Shit shit shit shit!" I spring into action, rushing to the kitchen to dash off the rest of the note. Dumping both glasses into the sink and scrubbing them with Dawn and hot water before drying them and putting them away. I drag out the suitcases from under the table and run to the door as fast as I can under such a burden. And I fling it open to rush out and....

There's a stranger on my porch.

Tall. Six-six or so. Lean. Well dressed. Dark hair and dark glasses. Handsome, with an elegant bearing that only the wealthy seem to have. My first thought is that I'm looking at some high powered realtor come to make an offer on the apartment complex.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm in a real hurry here. If you want to leave your card, that's fine. I'll get back to you when I can. But right now I'm late for an appointment." I say as politely, but firmly, as I can.

"Yes," he tells me in a low voice, "You are."

Slowly, you ease off the sunglasses to reveal what they've hidden with their dark lenses. Eyes every bit as red as the sunset now lighting the sky to the west on fire. I'm stricken silent, stunned at this revelation of yet another form. When you step toward me, I reflexively back up until I'm standing in my living room again. The door swings shut behind you as you tuck the glasses into the pocket of your blazer.

"We had an agreement, Beverly."

"I-I know. I just..."

"You were to be back by the time the sun set. That was thirty-six minutes ago. The sun is now eight degrees below the horizon, and we have entered nautical dusk." You lean down slightly, looking right into my eyes. "You. Are. Late."

All the air seems to leave my body at once, and I wilt into the chair to look dumbly up at you.

"Mike was here."

"I am aware."

"We talked for awhile. Not about anything important."

"Yes."

"I....I'm sorry."

"You will be. Get your things."

As though electrified, I jump up and grab my bags. But I fumble with one of them, it drops from my hand and pops open, spilling clothes and books all over the place. I give a dismayed whimper and kneel down to shovel everything back into the suitcase, shaking. You move toward me abruptly, and without even thinking, muscle memory takes over. I raise my hands to ward off a blow.

You straighten up again, and very slowly I lower my arms to look at you. My face as white as the moon.

"Did you think I was about to strike you, Beverly?"

What can I say? This isn't really my home. Never was. This is Daddy's home, and in Daddy's home...nothing good ever happened. If I was late coming home, I'd get a spanking or the back of his hand to my face. If I dropped a dish...maybe he'd twist my arm and shout at me that I'm as clumsy as my mother was. If I backtalked, it was a toss up between not being able to sit for a few days or spitting out a mouthful of blood. And that's just the way it was. The smell of this place, the lighting, the feel of the walls all around me, your anger. All

of it came together like the pieces of some awful and depressing puzzle, revealing a picture that I'm too ashamed to admit I know better than my own face. I look down again, pulling a dress toward me to wad up and stuff into the suitcase. Wordless and confused and sad and scared.

In this moment, you could do so many different things. You could hurt me. You could comfort me. You could...

"Stop being such a sniveling coward, child. You survived the assaults of your father and you have survived two nights beside a monster. You can certainly bear my annoyance. You are very good at inspiring it."

...or that, I guess.

I look up at you guiltily, and you bend down to take the other suitcase from me. Giving me full use of both hands to clean up my mess. I finish putting everything back and I latch the case, getting to my feet. We look at each other in this hateful room with its wooden paneling and its grim memories. I feel small and stupid and fragile and weak in front of you, things that I never felt while we were fighting you. It was in the bathroom just down the hall that you once appeared out of nowhere and filled the entire doorway and grabbed me by the throat. Your hand comes up again, but not to take me in an iron grip and fling me around like a doll. Instead, when I close my eyes miserably, I feel the soft warmth of your palm against my cheek.

I open my eyes. Your voice is low and gentle, like it was briefly last night when you told me to go to sleep.

"I will not hit you. If I did, I could kill you. And I do not wish to kill you. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes."

"Say it. And do not stutter. I loathe stuttering."

"You....won't hit me. Because you'd kill me. And you aren't going to kill me."

"Very good. Are you ready, then?"

"You said I'd be sorry though. For being late."

Your back is to me as you move toward the door to open it, and you don't even turn around when you answer me.

"And indeed you will be. Your dinner is going to be cold."

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Trembling

We walk back to the Well House together. You, easy in your human form. Me, looking furtively around us all the way there.

"Stop that. You are drawing more attention to yourself."

"I can't help it. What if we're seen? What if someone sees me going into a supposedly abandoned house with you?"

"They will assume it is for the purposes of criminal mischief and disregard it. But you will not be seen. No one notices anything in this town unless I wish them to notice."

I trip a little over a crack in the sidewalk, and I clutch your arm. You come to a stop, looking down at me from behind your dark glasses. Somewhat sheepishly, I let go.

"We all noticed you."

"As I said; no one notices anything unless I wish them to. Believe me, your sightings were completely intentional."

I fall silent, thinking about that. About all of it, from the disappearance of Georgie to Ben's realization that children vanished far too often here to the entire summer of danger and courage and fear and brief illusory triumph.

"A creature that hunts and has to eat and can be noticed or unnoticed at will. Is it magic?"

This time, you openly snort in derision.

"Magic does not exist. Don't be stupid. I simply have abilities that you do not."

"It looked like magic."

"I can control atomic particles to an extent. They are energy. I am

energy. You saw my Core when I made you float."

The orange orbs of light deep within your toothy maw, throbbing and glowing. I feel a shiver course up my spine, and I reach for your hand. You make a move as though to pull away, but I tighten my grip. And with a sigh, you accept the little intimacy.

"The....the lights."

"Deadlights. You do not want to get any closer than you already have. It would spell your demise. Now enough questions. You are worse than a five year old."

"You'd probably be more pleased if I were a five year old. At least then you would know what to do with me."

A smile tugs at your lips, and you nod.

"It would certainly simplify things."

We arrive at the house, and true to your word no one saw us. Not even an old woman on her porch, watering her hanging plants before going in to bed. I follow you up the creaking porch steps and into the front hall, expecting to see the same dusty, dingy interior that I'd left that morning. You had only altered the bedroom and bathroom upstairs, nothing else. But the moment I step inside, I can see that you've been anything but idle all day.

The living room is clean, a fire going in the hearth. A beautiful antique sofa graces the middle of the room. Small tables, a chair, book shelves. Even potted plants. You've left out no detail, and I stand in shock and delight in the entryway and turn in a slow circle to look around us. The wallpaper is clean, the floors are intact and look to be freshly mopped, there are candles and oil lamps burning here and there. None of the light was visible from outside. I wonder how deep the illusion goes. A hand on the back of the sofa reveals solidity, the soft warmth of crushed velvet. There's even a piano in here, and when I lift the cover and touch one cream colored ivory key there is a plink of sound. You stand silently in the hallway, watching my reaction.

I move past you with growing excitement. Yes! You've even modified the kitchen! A sink, clean counters, flowers in a vase, the low hum of the refrigerator running, and a little table and two chairs with...

"You made me dinner? You weren't just being sarcastic! You actually cooked?"

"I manifested. That is different. I would not go to the trouble of 'cooking' for some aggravating little human. It simply doesn't suit my needs to starve you or keep you in squalor. This is not a kindness. It is utilitarian."

"Oh bullshit. The monster of Derry actually cooked me rice!"

You bristle at that, and remove your sunglasses. Your shape melting, shifting up into the Clown. That sinister kill form, preferred guise and the one in which you feel most comfortable. I would throw my arms around you and cover your white face with kisses if I wasn't absolutely certain you'd bite me. Yellow eyes stare down at me with annoyance.

"It's not rice. It's risotto, you uneducated fool."

And that's it. Your only response. I take a seat at the table to happily help myself to the meal, which is still warm despite your dire warning. You take up a position in the corner, crouched like a cat with your black claws clicking on the linoleum. Wild orange hair seeming to glow in the lamplight. I find the unblinking gaze as I eat somewhat unsettling, a feeling that I'm getting used to and even coming to enjoy. This might be the strangest dinner of my life. I take a sip from a glass of icewater, then scoop a second helping of risotto onto my plate. I've never had it before, and it's delicious.

"Did your father sexually assault you?"

I choke, my eyes bulging, and it takes me whole minutes to stop coughing.

"What?"

"It is a very simple yes or no question."

"You can't just....just ASK someone something like that!"

"I can and will do whatever I wish. You invaded my home and distracted me from my solitude with your little suicide attempt, and now you are a troublesome presence in what has, for thousands of years, been a pleasantly solitary life. You cajoled me into bed. You slept on me, you both drool and snore, by the way, and you kissed me in the bathroom. You even compelled me to climb into a bathtub with you. And you ask hundreds of questions without respite. So it is clear that you want to talk. Is this not talking? Are we not getting to know one another?"

I hug myself protectively, feeling tears sting in my eyes yet again. Not now, dammit! When I open my mouth to speak, nothing comes out. But I suddenly don't feel hungry at all. I feel sick to my stomach and I'm shaking.

"Let's just say that you weren't the first nightmare I had to face."

We look at each other evenly for a few beats. I set down my spoon.

"I think....I think I'd like to go to bed."

"Come."

You rise to your feet and slip out of the kitchen soundlessly, a white shadow in the dark. And I follow with an iceberg in my stomach, my feet feeling heavy. At the top of the stairs we face the long hallway at the end of which is the master bedroom. The rooms on either side have been altered too, made into comfortable alcoves with a variety of archaic tools and devices in them. I glimpse a telescope, a model of the solar system, a mosaic tiled mirror, an easel with a blank canvas on it. The lengths you've gone to are almost ridiculously thorough. But I'm too numb and uncomfortable to really notice, let alone appreciate, what you've done to amuse the annoying little human who's troubled your existence.

In the bedroom, I take off my shoes and set them by the door. I'm starting to calm down from the slap in the face of a history I'd just as soon forget. Being here, in this room with you, has the strangest soothing properties. It shouldn't. You're not designed to be soothing,

as you would be the first to tell me. But you comfort me anyway. I'm almost done with even questioning it. I pull back the covers on the bed.

"Do you not wish to bathe first? You smell like your old home."

"I mean, I guess I could. If my stench offends you."

"Everything you do and are offends me. I should kill you. But I believe I will watch you clean yourself and then watch you sleep instead."

Might as well try. I'm starting to truly appreciate my precarious position on the leading side of your very small sense of mercy. I strip off the blue dress and drape it over a chair, watching you watching me. Not even a flicker of interest. So I remove my bra.

Nothing.

I slide down the panties and step out of them, then turn to face you with my hands on my hips.

"This doesn't even slightly interest you, does it. Me being naked."

"Naked humans are easier to eat."

I grin, kind of amused by that. And it occurs to me that I didn't even thank you for dinner. I move closer to you and very hesitantly reach up to put my hands on your broad shoulders. The satin is soft beneath my fingers. The bones and flesh beneath that are hard.

"Thank you, Nightmare, for making me...whatever that was."

"Risotto."

"It was really good. I've never had anything that fancy before."

You purse your red, red lips and regard me. Then, without warning, your large hand closes over my left breast. I stand still under the exploration, holding my breath. Is this it? Is this the moment that I've been praying for, secretly and shamefully, and wishing for and hoping for and looking forward to if it was even a physical

possibility? Is it? Something must have shown in my eyes, because your whole expression softens. You release me, only to cup my hips and squeeze them a little without extending your claws. Still, I say and do nothing. Letting this strange moment play itself out. Finally bored with the pawing, you step back and drop into your familiar crouch. Staring at me with large orange eyes.

"I fail to see what is enticing about the female body. Or the male, for that matter. There is a pleasant warmth and softness to you, but that is all. Seeing you naked only makes me hungry."

"You don't only eat flesh, do you? It's emotions too."

"Fear, anguish, rage, sorrow. The strong emotions are to human meat what seasoning is to all the things you consume. It increases the pleasure of the meal."

"Well....just think about the emotions that come along with two people who are desperately in love just being naked together."

"Nothing of value. Unless they find one another hideous to the point of horrified revulsion."

"Oh my God." I sigh, feeling defeated. I don't even know what I was expecting. "Come on, it's time for a bath. You sure you don't want to join me? Do you even have a body under that costume? Or is it all just satin and pompoms the whole way in to where the light is?"

You prowl after me, moody and large and silent until we reach the bathroom and I spin the taps on the tub.

"Of course I have a body beneath my regalia. What a ridiculous question."

"Will you....."

"No."

"See, I knew you were going to say that. What if I shut my eyes?"

No answer. So I just sigh, and when the bath tub is full I climb into the deliciously warm water and stretch out, leaning back against the

porcelain lip and closing my eyes. At least you're here, in this room with me. I can feel your presence like a looming thunderhead.

As before, there is a guttering of the oil lamp's flame. And as before, it flickers out. I know better than to imagine it's anything but your will that extinguishes the light. I open my eyes to the comparative darkness and hold my breath, waiting for whatever will happen to happen. There's a rustling of silk and the soft chime of bells. But this time, the rustling goes on for a few moments. Shifting, movement in the dark. Then the unmistakable sound of your clothes dropping to the floor. I can almost tell which pieces. The barely perceptible sound of the collar. The heavier jingle and hushed thump of your high waisted tunic. The soft discarding of the bloomers, the pants. The removal of shoes.

Now I really can't breathe. I couldn't if I wanted to. I draw my legs up to my chest and sit straighter, hugging my knees, biting my lip. Wondering why I don't want to scream or run or be anywhere but here. The water level rises when you climb in with me and settle on the other side. I can feel it lapping against me. But I can't feel you. So I reach out with one hand until my fingertips come in contact with warm skin.

There's a growl in response, but I am coming to understand the timbre of your growls and snarls and hisses, and I know this one is not so much threatening as it is vaguely agitated. Your knee. I think I'm touching your knee. The water sloshes a bit when I move forward to touch your other knee, then blindly search for your hands. I find them, both of them, the claws extended and your grip strong on my wrists as you stop me from further exploration.

"I told you I had a body. And now I am bathing with you. I hope this satisfies your morbid curiosity. You will keep your hands to yourself, Beverly. Is that understood?"

"Yes. I can respect that. I'm just happy you're here."

"What is wrong with you."

"I wish I knew. But here we are in the tub together. Want me to wash your hair?"

"Oh why not? How many fingers do you really need, anyway?" Your voice is dark, sarcastic, and definitely carries an air of threat to it. I pull my hands back when you release my wrists, and I retreat to my end of the bathtub.

"Ok. Ok, I won't try to wash your hair either."

"I do not require soap and water to become clean. Sometimes it suits me to appear pristine. At other times, the viscera of my feeding is appropriately shocking adornment. But matter is mutable; I can be clean or dirty as an act of will."

"Well I can't. So I should, you know, get to it." I duck under the water and get my hair wet, and when I sit up again I reach for the bottle of shampoo. Pouring some into my palm I lather up and scrub my scalp, getting rid of the smell of my old home. I guess I don't want to evoke those memories anymore either. It's dim, but I can barely make out the giant white shape of you across from me now that my eyes are adjusting to the lack of light. There are oil lamps still lit in the bedroom behind me through the open door. And your pale flesh seems almost to glow in the dark. I chew on my lower lip, looking at you. Gradually watching your broad shoulders and massive chest become a little clearer, just a little. There seems to be little point in speaking. This tenuous truce that's somehow arisen between us could snap at any moment. I could bleed. You might decide to be done with the annoyance of my presence and revert to the killer clown again, and there would be nothing I could do about it. I'm here now, not just on your home turf but unarmed and naked in a bath tub with you. This is about as vulnerable as I could get. Without even meaning to, my eyes slide to the towel rack on the wall.

"Still planning for the worst?" You're relaxed, confident. Almost casual. Unlike me, you are never unarmed. Not as long as you have your teeth and claws and wits and hunger. I wipe some of the water off my face.

"I guess part of me is. Doesn't make sense, does it."

"You really should decide whether you want to kill me or kiss me, Beverly." You tell me softly, dipping your fingertips in the water. When you withdraw your hand, your claws are sheathed. I think they

are, anyway. But you aren't done speaking. And what you say next nearly stops my heart.

"And I suppose I should decide whether I want to slaughter you or seduce you. A difficult conundrum isn't it. Two enemies who seem to have no more desire to fight."

Silence. A very tense silence. The weight of five years of confused longing and tormented dreams seems to settle into every crack in this stillness. Involuntarily, I slowly draw my knees up to my chest again and wrap my arms around them. The silence drags on. What am I feeling? Why am I here? Why did I seek you out, if not for this talk....this exact talk that you've just unexpectedly opened the door to? I draw breath to speak, but nothing clever comes out.

"I guess it is difficult."

"Yes."

You know so much more than I do about even this, something I bet you've never done before. All I can do is keep winging it, like I have been since I stumbled back to this shitty town like a salmon returning to its birthing ground to mate and die.

"Nightmare?"

"Dream."

"He didn't....you know. Rape me. Not all the way. There's plenty of awful things that happened, touching and shit like that. He was awful and he was escalating. But I'm still a virgin. I killed him before he could take that. Because I wasn't his girl. I wasn't anyone's girl." And just like that, the dam bursts. "It made me SICK. The way he stank, the sweaty hands and his disgusting breath and the fact that I couldn't stop him. You're, like, the master of horror right? Wrong! No matter WHAT you did to me, it could never be half as bad as what I went through with my own father! His feet on the creaky floor board outside my bedroom. Any night at all could have been the night he decided I was ripe for the picking! Living under that kind of threat every...day...of...my...life! From the age of SEVEN on! And no mother to protect me. HE was supposed to protect me. That was his

JOB. You want to know why I wasn't afraid of you in the sewer? You had me by the throat, you GLARED at me when I said I wasn't afraid of you. You could smell it. I was telling the truth. And you told me I would be. But the truth is, I was GRATEFUL. You came for me in my moment of triumph, you took me out of that bathroom on the day when I'd finally taken down the biggest monster of my LIFE. Next to daddy? You were a strange and otherworldly fever dream that didn't scare me. No. I had adrenaline rushing through every part of my whole body and all I could think of was 'I can take this guy.' You were miraculous and brilliant and I was READY. I was ready to fight and ready to die if that's what was going to happen. But I was ready. I'd finished my business, I'd defeated the looming shadow, I was going to die someday anyway but nothing else could scare me. And I saw you, I truly SAW you down to the marrow of your bones and the Light inside the marrow when you made me Float. But I wasn't scared of you. Far from it. It was like staring into the sunrise after a long and horrible battle. The light burned away all the blood and the noise and the pain, and you held a champion in your claws. I wish I could have bottled that moment! And now I'm here, dammit! I came back. I'm here. I came back to find the big, gorgeous, terrifying, perfect dragon who was with me in my moment of triumph and who couldn't scare me. I've come back to face you. Do I want to kill you or kiss you? I want to kiss you. Should you slaughter or seduce me? Seduce me. I'll give you what that bastard never got to take from me. You're the only one worthy."

You're quiet during the rush of words. I don't cry this time, oddly enough. Someplace deep inside me a fire has been ignited. That same fire that has always burned in me, the fire that makes me who I am. I shift my position, moving closer to where you lurk across the trembling expanse of water between us, and I rise up onto my knees and reach for your face. Touching you even if you think I have too many fingers and you're about to remedy that.

"I want to kiss you." I repeat. My voice doesn't shake. "I know you could kill me. I know you probably will, eventually. I know how big you are, how strong you are, how you're not built for gentleness or mercy. I know that no one has ever loved you before and you haven't loved anyone either. I know you're a monster, Pennywise. Nightmare. Deimos. Rip me apart if that's what you want. But before you do it,

give me everything I'm asking for. Let my death be something different. Kill me with your passion instead of your hunger. See what it feels like. I'm not scared."

I can feel you breathing, feel the tenseness of your body, and for another handful of seconds you do not move.

Then, slowly, your hand wraps completely around my upper arm. Jesus Christ you're huge. But you're not attacking. The lion taking his ease while the rabbit scrambles all over him. I blink in the sudden flare of light from the oil lamp, my eyes dazzled. When I open them again, your yellow-orange gaze transfixes me. My wet fingertip traces one of your markings, from just above the graceful indentation of your eyebrow down to the corner of your mouth, glistening. And those lips remain closed, no fangs showing. No teeth to sink into my flesh and begin the destruction of a fearless and obsessed penitent kneeling here with you in the middle of this illusion of warmth and comfort.

"Your human Baudelaire once said 'The Devil pulls the strings which make us dance. We find delight in the most loathsome things. Some furtherance of Hell each new day brings. And yet we feel no horror in that rank advance.' You have certainly chosen a loathsome thing in which to take pleasure, Beverly Marsh."

"I think you're a beautiful predator."

Your broad forehead creases slightly with confusion.

"That is not my purpose. To be a predator, yes. To be beautiful, no."

"You just quoted poetry to your food."

There's a deep sigh, and your grip on my arm relaxes. With hesitancy, your other hand moves up to touch my cheek. I thrill to the touch, lean into it in fact, and keep my eyes on yours without saying anything. It's so weird, but I genuinely don't feel any fear or revulsion. How could I have ever thought you were hideous? A giant Harlequin, a doll divested of his accoutrements here in the water with me. And you are so artfully perfect.

Slowly, slowly and almost gently, your hand moves from my arm to my back and you draw me against you. I lower my eyes then to see the miracle of my pale hand against your even paler, ghostly chest.

"You look like you've been carved out of marble."

"I did not intend to be appealing."

"Then you're accidental art I guess."

You could utterly destroy the moment by mocking it, rolling your eyes and responding with some sarcastic and cutting comment that would hurt me. It would be so easy for you. You, who mocked a grieving brother by jeering at him that you were real enough for the dead. But you don't. Instead, those large eyes move from my face to my hair, and you delicately trail your fingers over it.

"Winter fire."

"You read Bill's poem?"

"It was not Bill who wrote it. The little fat boy, Ben. He was your secret admirer those many years ago. Not the stuttering hero you wished for." Your eyes return to my face, your hand at the back of my neck. "It would seem that you did not choose the pompous little king or his henchman, in the end. You've chosen the jester."

"Will he choose me back?"

"I have killed your kind with great relish since before your distant ancestors were even born. Your attraction is the very definition of insanity."

"You're not exactly the poster clown for sanity either."

"An accurate statement which I do not refute."

There's a brief flash at the window, and a few seconds later a distant rumble of thunder. I run my own hand through hair now, wild and soft.

"Also winter fire. Your hair's the same color as mine. Was that on

purpose?"

"Not consciously. But I do not regret the resemblance. Your hair is quite lovely."

It's the first compliment you have ever paid me. A great surge of hope fills my chest. We're pressed against one another, skin to skin, lightly and hesitantly touching one another, and you've just unbelievably said something kind. Shamelessly, I fish for more.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"I find you to be a physically healthy and youthful specimen of the species, yes."

"That's a weird compliment."

"Every single thing about this is weird, Beverly. You are weird."

I smile, stroking your cheek.

"You taste like candy, you know."

"I knew you liked candy. A parlor trick, for my kind to change their scent or taste or appearance."

"So you changed something about yourself not to scare or disgust me, but to please me?"

"I....suppose that I did."

Miracle of all miracles, you actually look slightly taken aback at the revelation.

"Will you kiss me now?"

Your eyes narrow, but I don't look away. You seem to be considering whether to shoot me down again or...

"Not here."

Without so much as bracing yourself on the side of the tub, you are rising to your feet in the bath with me in your arms. I gasp, clinging

to you to keep from falling, my hands grasping against water-slicked skin in an effort to hold on. I didn't need to worry though. Your arms are strong under my back and legs as you step out and shake yourself slightly like a dog to rid yourself of the damp. And you carry me like a little girl into the bedroom again, both of us naked in the blaze of light. Unashamed, looking only into one another's eyes as you lay me on the bed and draw the sheet over us both. I want to touch you everywhere and explore with my hands all that I've imagined with my mind, but this moment is so breathlessly unreal and fragile that I don't want to ruin it and do something to trigger your ever-present anger again. I lie quiet and patient as I can as you settle in next to me and roll on your side to look down at this aggravating, strange food item that refuses to take no for an answer. You have devoured worlds. You have terrified emperors and caused civilizations to crumble into panic and mayhem. But this? This is new. I look up at you without hatred or fear, my blue eyes holding only wonder and eagerness.

"If you wish to leave this place and go back to your life, I will allow it. You may run, child. I do not often release prey."

"I don't want to run away. This is where I need to be, and I'm not scared of whatever lies ahead. Alright? Just believe me. You can read my mind anyway. Look. I'm not even trembling."

The bed creaks as you lean over me, claws sinking into the mattress. I close my eyes in anticipation when you lower your head. Peppermint cotton candy sweetness, the scent of stone and petrichor, and the softest touch in the world of full red lips against mine. In the hushed moment before the kiss, your voice is a gentle whisper.

"You will be."

A moment later, I am.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11: Interrogatives

The storm finally arrives an hour later.

Lying in bed together, my head on your bare white shoulder and your arm around me, we listen to the sound of the rain pelting the windows. Things aren't perfect. There are still so many hurdles to overcome, so many battles and uncertainties ahead. I can't give you forever. You can't ever fully give me yourself. We are separated by an uncrossable universe of limitations. But this is wonderful. This feels good. I don't want it to end.

My hand is against your chest over the place where your heart should be. But there's no steady thumping under my palm. You don't keep your 'heart' in the standard human place where it's expected. You don't have a belly button, either. I noticed that about fifteen minutes ago when I lowered my hand to your stomach and you caught my wrist to keep me from moving any lower.

I touch the place again, feeling the steel cords of muscle beneath your pale flesh.

"So how come you don't have one? A belly button, I mean. Everybody has one."

"I was not born of a woman's body."

"I know, but you could have manifested one. Or whatever."

"I fail to see the point."

"Well it makes you anatomically correct, I guess."

"I assure you, my anatomy is lacking nothing by leaving off the strange scar to which you refer. Do you receive any sensory input or valuable attributes from yours?"

I think about that, touching my own belly button. And I frown.

"Well....no."

"I thought not."

We're quiet again, and I slowly dare to roll on top of you and look down at your perfect red and white face in the yellow firelight. You'd kissed me only three times, each one slightly more passionate than the one before it. Exploratory. But you stopped there, and pushed me away. I sit up, my thighs on either side of your stomach, and hold the sheet around me to protect a little modesty. Funny, how it didn't matter before but it matters now. We just look at one another. Then you speak.

"Before this goes any further, I should let you go. I should release you, and hope that in doing so you will release me, and leave this place and never come here again. I want to strike at you, Beverly. I want to drive you away running and bleeding but alive. Even now, I can feel my teeth growing sharper. My mind whispers only one word. Attack. Force you away, complete the rejection, break your heart and push you to the margin of my consciousness and the locked and barred fortress of my soul and never, ever think of you again."

"But you won't."

"I have not decided. There are questions we ought to ask one another, don't you think? You only know me marginally, through my hunting and my feeding and these past few days. That is not enough knowledge to love a creature. You are very young, Beverly. Young and foolish."

"I'm not foolish, Pennywise. I know what you are. Maybe better even than some of your victims. It's just that I don't think you're the worst thing in the world. But I'm starving for information about you. I want to know more, if you're willing to tell me. You have no idea how many times I dreamed of you. Some of them were nightmares, yes. Others weren't. This time, it's real. This is real. I'm not floating in some sewer with dead eyes, I'm naked in bed with you."

"You clearly do not care whether you live or die. Your behavior even when you were younger is indicative of that. You took reckless risks, you cast yourself into every dangerous situation, you defied and even

attacked a monster larger than yourself and a hundred times as strong." You point out, your claws tapping against my hips. I slowly lean down, touching your face. "And you came back even after you'd escaped. I seldom leave my hunting grounds. You would have been fine had you stayed away from Derry. Some part of you never recovered from the trauma of your youth. Some part of you wants to die."

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm just unusual."

"You are insane."

"Are you hungry? Do you need to hunt again?"

"I am always hungry, as I told you. But I can wait a day or two."

"Then let's do what you want. Let's talk. You can read me like a book, so you don't need to ask nearly as many questions unless you prefer to hear me explain myself. I don't know enough about you. I want to ask you everything. But I don't want to test your patience. You have quite a temper."

"You have not even seen my true temper. You have only seen me annoyed. Pray to your God that you never incur my wrath. And yes... I will answer your questions. It is rainy and cold outside. We are warm and content here. The timing seems adequate. What do you wish to know first?"

Excitement and pleasure flood through me. Somehow, against all odds, we have come to terms in a way. I'm still bent over you, my chest to yours and my hand on your cheek, and you aren't growling. Your voice is, if anything, low and melodious. Calm. I rest my forearms on your white shoulders and play with that fire orange hair spread across the pillow.

"Do you absolutely have to eat children?"

"Children are the easiest. But I can eat anything at all, and I do."

"If you could come close to describing the flavor to a human, what would fear taste like?"

You lick your lips, pondering the question for a few moments.

"That's somewhat tricky. It tastes salty, like tears or seawater. But thick like caramel. Filling. It zings along the senses like wine and makes me euphoric for a time. I can smell it, taste it, consume it and draw sustenance from it. I suppose that if I had to define it more simply, I would call it a comfort food for me."

"That's.....really creepy."

"So is eating the unhatched embryos of a chicken, or suckling at the teat of a non-human well into adulthood. The universe is full of oddities. My eating habits are not yours, but they grant me energy."

I move my fingers to your ear, tracing the white shape. It reminds me of a seashell.

"Why fear though? Why not eat happiness or love or something positive?"

I can feel your grunt of irritation at my stupidity, but to your credit you don't mock me again.

"These emotions are never very strong in a human being. Your kind are predisposed to fear, not to joy or love. Weak tea compared to warm mead. You tell me which is preferable."

"Can you smell what I'm feeling?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell me."

You sigh, and your hands move up to my lower back. I rest my head on your shoulder and close my eyes.

"Curiosity. Eagerness to connect. Loneliness and deeply hidden and guarded pain. Confidence in your own abilities. Shame at your own desires. And you do feel desire now, as strange as that is to me."

I don't open my eyes.

"What does desire taste like?"

You sniff my hair, and when you breathe out I can detect the faintest whisper of a purr.

"Rich and sweet with a hint of spice. Chocolate and chili peppers. It is more delicate than fear. I have sensed it before, tasted it, but never truly appreciated the flavor."

I'm shaking again, and you're right; I do feel ashamed. But there's no denying or hiding or lying about the strange obsession that has been haunting me for half a decade. I lick your neck, and you growl at me. Claws tensing on my bare back.

"I want you." I whisper.

"You want the impossible."

"You're not physically capable of making love?"

"I did not say that. I am physically capable of anything. Including ripping your arms off."

There's no real threat in your tone. My eyes are still closed as I lean up just enough to kiss you. Soft red lips. Taste of candy. Sweet and spicy, chocolate and chili peppers. I run my hand down your side, resting my fingertips on your hip. When you don't stop me, I move those fingers to your thigh.

"Careful, Beverly."

The warning tone to your soft murmur brings up the hair on my arms. I stop, but only because you told me to. Only because I'm scared too, and surely you can smell and taste that. Scared but wanting. And you, my mortal enemy, predator of my kind, who will still be alive and alone ten thousand years from now when the universe has long forgotten me...you lie still and let this tender assault take place.

"Even my very first kill, which I hardly recall now, was easy and amusing and natural compared to the awkwardness of this fumbling, child. I am no innocent, no blushing naif. I know how love is made,

and I know the mechanisms perfectly well. But boredly waiting for some panting teenage couple to finish their groping and grunting in the back of a vehicle and emerge, sweaty and glowing, to fall prey to my claws and teeth is a far cry from full immersion in the intimacy."

"We can learn together."

"You have not asked me if I wish to learn."

And holy shit, I haven't. I'm the aggressive one here. How's that for a bizarre change? I'm the one pushing for more. I'm the one who got you naked, who crawled all over you and kissed you and made demands. My face flushes, and I sit up. Looking down at you with an apology in my eyes.

"Oh my God, I am so embarrassed."

"Yes well, I hardly respect boundaries either when there is something I want. Do not feel badly."

You sit up as well, the covers pooling around your waist and your massive chest fully on display. I tentatively reach out for your hand, drawing it to me and tracing that strange symbol on your wrist.

"Deimos. What does it mean?"

"Terror and dread. It is the name of one of the two moons of Mars. I have a brother named after the other one. We are identical save in size. I am larger."

Some of the color drains from my face.

"There's two of you?"

"Not exactly. Long ago, I split my energy into two parts to maximize feeding and minimize the threat of being forever destroyed. As long as one lives; both will live, no matter how badly damaged. He is somewhat more merciful and restrained than I am. You will not find him. Do not look."

"I won't. I promise."

"Good. Now it is my turn to ask a few questions. When you went away to Portland, what was your life like?"

"It was good, I guess. I mean, I had my own room. It was clean. I got to go to high school, I made a few friends, I got new clothes because Aunt Kathy took me shopping. I had a boyfriend..."

"Who was this boy?"

"No one important. He took me to the prom and out to the movies a few times."

You look aggravated, and your claws shred the edge of the sheet slightly.

"You will never speak to him again."

I grin, kind of touched that you actually care enough to be jealous.

"Nope. Never. You're my only obsession, Nightmare."

The sound you make is halfway between a growl and a grunt, as inhuman as everything else about you.

"Did you always feel as though you were something of an outsider among your kind?"

"Pretty much. I mean, not when I was really little. Believe it or not, I was even friends with Greta Keene and some of the other girls who made my life rotten in school later on. But up to the age of about six, I was ok. I didn't know there was anything wrong with me."

"And now?"

I shrug, looking down at your stomach between my thighs. White, white, white as an Alaskan winter. And so bizarre next to my own skin, which I'd always thought of as pale. I place my palm on your chest.

"I feel more comfortable than I ever have in my life."

You study me, your beautiful strange eyes fixed on my face, the

pupils dilating just slightly. Then you are tugging me down to nestle me against your side, rolling to face me. That huge heavy body causing the bed to creak. I rest my left hand on your hip, looking up into your eyes when you lean over me. Slowly, your long fingers curl around my wrist, and you ease my hand away from your hip. Lower. Not breaking eye contact. Until my fingertips encounter....

I freeze.

"Oh my God."

"Hardly. Still obsessed with the thought of coupling? I do not think you would survive the experience, let alone take pleasure from it. I have no intention of putting myself out to change shape simply to please you. This is the body I have chosen, this is my favorite form. If you are still suicidal and insane enough to desire me, then this is what you will be dealing with."

I can't speak. My hand is shaking as I explore you a little more. Until you take my wrist again and pull my palm to your chest once more.

"Not so brave now, are you."

An attempt to say something yields no fruit. You laugh softly, then roll away from me. Unexpectedly, you yawn. And it is a wider yawn than a normal human would be capable of, flashing rows of shark teeth that I know from experience are capable of ripping a person into pieces. My eyes are like saucers, riveted to your face until your teeth click together when you close your mouth. You blink at me, amused, and sit up to turn away and plant your feet on the floor by the bed.

"I suppose I will dress now. The hunger has been sharpened by your pawing, I must hunt."

"H-hunt. Yes."

"I find your shock rather flattering. It is my assumption that I am fully proportionate for my height. You still expect me to conform to your preconceived notions of what a human is, don't you Beverly. Even though you know very well that I am not human. Not even

remotely."

"It was just....unexpected. But I'm not giving up and I don't care. I still want you."

"Do you then. How very moving."

You rise to your feet and prowl back into the bathroom, and I can't help but stare at your 'fully proportionate' body as you fetch your clothing and pull on each piece. Somewhere in the back of my mind I can hear Richie's voice screaming "Holy shit! Holy fucking shit!" over and over again like a broken toy. I sit up in bed, tearing my eyes away from the spectacle of a seven foot nightmare buttoning on a clown costume. I look at my wrist, measure it with my fingers. About right, yeah. Ok. Ok, it's probably possible. Maybe? Physically possible? Would I die right away, or would there be a window of time in which I might find medical treatment? I look up again to find you standing near the bed, tugging on one white glove and watching me with amused detachment.

I swallow hard, meeting your eyes.

"Do you want me?"

It's the first time I've asked the question. The first time I've even wondered it. So caught up with the thought of wanting you, I never even considered what it might be to have those feelings reciprocated. You are quiet, looking down at me, but your claws flex. Ripping neatly through the fabric of your gloves. I don't flinch.

You sigh, and the rage I might have expected if I was thinking clearly doesn't bubble to the surface. Instead, you place those claws beneath my chin and tilt my face up.

"So many meanings to the word, Beverly. But I will not insult you by pretending to be confused as to which definition you refer to now. Do I want you." You repeat the question, and those lamplike eyes are steady on my face. "Do I want to mate with you, kiss you, hold you, be as gentle as I am able with you. This is the question that you ask. And you ask it of a creature who has been very, very honest about his desires up until this very moment. I desire to consume you, eat your

flesh and fear, rip you apart and bathe in your blood. These things my animal nature desires."

I don't pull away or start to cry. Something seems to be on the tip of your tongue to say, and I hold my breath. Feeling the sharp threat of your claws beneath my chin. After a moment, you continue.

"There is much more to me than animal impulses, Beverly. Something you and your little friends would never have been allowed to learn, had I destroyed you all that summer the way I wanted to. But here you are, returned from safety to seek out the danger once more. And you have been naked in your honesty, transparent and holding nothing back. I am not evil, as you seem to think. If anything, I would call myself completely neutral to human suffering and emotion. You are simply food. All of you. Or you were. Do I want you, Beverly Marsh? Does the monster desire the maiden?"

"Do you?" I blurt out the words, and your lips twitch slightly. But whether it is a smile or a snarl, I don't know.

"You ask a great deal of me. I did not seek you out. I did not follow you to Portland. And believe me – I could have. There is no limitation on my movements whatsoever. I am simply lazy and used to my cycle of sleeping and waking and feeding and sleeping again beneath this small town. But I can be VERY active when the mood takes me. I have hunted in the frozen north and in the jungles near the equator. I have amassed legends of my bloodthirst and my deadliness across this entire planet. And across many planets that you have never even heard of and will never see. In all my long life, I have never 'wanted' anyone. But you are asking me now if I have feelings for you. You, among all the many life forms I have known in seven billion years of existence. What a positively naive and almost arrogant question."

A little hurt, I lower my eyes. But you're not done.

"Look at me."

I do.

"Beverly, you are unique among all of the living things I have known.

Ridiculous and foolish and broken as you are....you do stand out. You are beautifully different. A woman who has endured a thousand hells, but who still emerged victorious on the other side of them. I am intrigued by you. I will not kill you. I wish to know you. And yes, Beverly Amanda Marsh. I do want you."

There. It's been said, it's now a sentence that lies between us, and I can't even fathom what it cost you to say the words. I reach for your hand, and you don't yank it away with a snarl. Yes, there is a little growl as I press my lips to your wrist and then rest my forehead on your knuckles. But you don't pull back. I raise my head, tears on my cheeks.

"I love you." I whisper. You huff out a growl-sigh.

"On your head be it, Beverly. Now rest. There will be paper money left on the counter downstairs. Use it to purchase groceries and such. Explore the home, I have made it exceedingly comfortable for you. You shall want for nothing. Do not reveal where you are staying to anyone. Speak of me to no one. And be here by sundown of every day for the rest of your natural life. I do not know what path you and I are on, or where it leads. But I find you fascinating, and I wish to have you nearby. I do want you. I shall mate with you presently, if you can bear it. I have never mated before. I believe I will be frightfully bad at it. You must be patient with me, human. I have not known love before. Sleep now. Do not come to seek me. I will return to you when my hunger has been sated. Fear not. I will return. As foolish and desperately dangerous and wildly, inexplicably attracted as you are to me...I am coming to share the obsession. There may come a day when you regret igniting this interest. I do not care either way. You have my attention, Beverly. I do not know what love is. But perhaps in time, you will teach me this as well."

I could die of love in this moment, and I rise naked from the bed to throw my arms around your neck and hug you as tightly as I can. You turn my head with a nuzzle, licking my face with your rough tongue, and your purr is thunderous.

"Leave off the groping until later, child. Woman. You will have your chance to wallow all over me at a later time. Now stop, before my annoyance causes me to snap at you."

"You're perfect. I don't care how sick that makes me, saying it. I want you, and I love you, and I can't wait for you to come back. I hope you find someone slow and fat and full of terror. I'll be here when you come back. Waiting here in this bed."

"I share your hope. There is no shortage of the plump and terrified. But there shall be one less in the world when this night is over. Until I return, Beverly."

And you lean down to kiss me. Your rasped tongue meeting mine for a fraction of a second. I cup your white face in my hands, and when you pull away finally my eyes remain closed. When they open again, you are gone.

I draw a shaking breath and flop back against the pillows in a haze of pure bliss. I don't even care what the other Losers might think of me now. Let them hate me, or think I'm sick.

I love you. I love Pennywise the Clown. I love Deimos, brother of....I look it up on my phone, the name of the other moon of Mars. Brother of Phobos.

I love you, and nothing in the world can change that. Whenever you come back from killing one of my fellow human beings, you'll find me waiting. Ready for the agony of joining with you. Ready for the long and impossible defeat of being your mate until the day I die.

12. Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve: Love

The man ringing up my purchases at the grocery store is infuriating. He keeps staring at me, trying to chat me up, and he's hinted at his availability on Saturday night about four times. I ignore it as best I can, hoping he gets the hint.

"That's a whole lot of meat. You grill out a lot? Having a party?" He asks, scanning one of six steaks I picked up. I want to make you dinner, even though you probably won't enjoy it as much as I enjoyed the meal you 'manifested' for me. You said you could eat anything. Steak seems like a natural choice. I selected the bloodiest looking ones.

"Nope, no party. I just like steak."

"You know, I make really good steak. You should let me show you. Come on, how do you know if you like me or not when you won't even give me a chance? That's pretty rude. I bet if I was an asshole to you, you'd totally want to hang out with me. Pretty girls always seem to...."

"I don't 'have' to give you anything." I interrupt him. My temper finally rises. It's not even this jerk. It's every man who has ever made demands, been manipulative, pushed me, groped me, tried to take something that wasn't theirs. I reach across the counter and shove my purchases to the end where the plastic bags are. And I begin bagging my own groceries. "You think that just because you smile at me, I'm somehow compelled to smile back? That just because you happen to have a cock, I should give you the chance to shove it in me?! Let me tell you something," I lean closer and read his name tag, "Troy, I am not going to just capitulate and come have dinner with you for the sake of politeness. Here's a little news flash. You don't get to have me. You can't have every woman you're interested in. That's the way of the world, boy. You can stand there and whine about how girls only like boys who treat them badly and the good ones always get friendzoned and blah blah blah. Whatever incel shit you want to mumble about under your breath while I walk out of here. But the

truth is, women are turned off by your whiny pleading. We are disgusted by your transparent, desperate words designed to compel us to fuck you. Every single year, we as a gender lose more and more respect for your gender. You are not kings anymore; you're weak little bitches who need a safe space to recover from the trauma of being shot down by mean nasty women. It's men like you who make me wish I was a lesbian. But I'm not. I have someone already, and he's a thousand times the man you are."

I throw the last steak into a bag, loop them all over my wrist, and turn away from him. Storming out of the store before he can respond. Fuck him. Fuck his whole kind. I am done with human men and their frailties. I am ready to take on something bigger, better, stronger. Someone more confident and more assertive and more masculine than any human male could be. I am ready for you even if it kills me.

I stop by the florist for a big bouquet of lilies and roses and carnations. You left enough money for about ten trips to the grocery store. By the time I arrive back at the house on Neibolt, parking carefully down the road so that no one will see my car and think I'm visiting the 'haunted house', I am calmer. I carry everything inside in two trips. Canned food, fresh food, flowers, cleaning supplies. I put everything away in its proper place and lock the front door. Turning the dead bolt may be the most satisfying sound I have ever heard. There. Locked away from the rest of the world. Locked in here to await you.

I take three steaks out to marinate them in the red wine I found in one cabinet earlier. Two for you and one for me. Pouring the bottle over them, I look out the kitchen window at the dilapidated back yard. There's an apple tree out there, gnarled and overgrown. Weeds. Garbage blown in from other areas of the town. It's a mess. I wash my hands, drying them on a towel decorated with red balloons. Nice touch. Then I am furtively slipping out the back door to further investigate the little area behind the house. There's a fence, at least. And it's still standing. A few boards missing here and there, but largely intact. Tall. Offering a modicum of cover against prying eyes. I wander over to the apple tree and reach up to tug down one of the red fruits. Are they cursed? Is the land here so soaked with blood and tears that everything growing here might be poisoned? I take a bite,

the juice dripping down my chin, and am instantly relieved at the clean, healthy taste and the firmness of the white flesh. I wander the rest of the yard, eating the apple, the barest bones of a plan beginning to form in my mind.

This small space could, with your permission, become beautiful. Of course I can't very well manicure the front yard. It would attract all kinds of notice. But the back? If I repaired the fence somehow and left the hedges as they are? I could plant a little garden here. Tend to the apple tree. Keep the grass trimmed as best I can without a gas powered mower. It would give me something to do as well as offer up the possibility of bringing my own sort of beauty to this place. A way of making it right somehow, the way the Losers disrespected the Well House five years ago. Bandido on a bullet hole, I know. But it seems only right now. Only fair.

You are not evil, you said. Neutral, if anything. Not evil...just hungry. And you did whatever you needed to do to increase the merit of your meals by inspiring terror and revulsion – things you can and do eat. As I unravel everything I know of you, looking at it all through this new lens of neutrality, it makes sense. You're manipulative, lethal, vicious, cruel, sarcastic. You preyed upon our very worst fears. All summer you seasoned us and readied your meal with the attention to craft of a master chef. And we played right into your claws.

I move back to the apple tree and pick as many as I can reach, gathering them into the long skirt of the dress I chose for today. I'm barefoot, hair still damp from a bath, no makeup, and the white dress is beautiful. I've never worn clothes like this before. Never been able to just....take baths without being harassed. Never been able to eat as much as I wanted. Never been listened to. There are a lot of 'nevers' that are suddenly happening now under the watchful yellow eyes of a monster. I carry the apples back inside the house, careful to shut and lock the door behind me. I'm not leaving the house again today. Just waiting right here for you. The way you left, the words we exchanged, the intimacy of this morning; it's all leading somewhere that I very much want to go.

In the kitchen again I peel and core the apples, then slice them carefully into chunks. Flour. Sugar. Butter. Salt. Brown sugar.

Cinnamon. I barely know how to cook, but I can look up a recipe on my phone easy enough. I kneel down by the antiquated stove to try and figure out how it works. Oh my God, I think I actually have to light it. As in, set flame to it. Getting up again, I begin the hunt for a lighter or matches. They're discovered in a drawer to the left, and I take the little book of matches and kneel by the stove again. It takes me sixteen matches and a whole lot of cursing to get the stove lit. But once I've done it, I feel a sense of pride that rivals an Olympic Gold Medalist.

Regulating the temperature takes about twenty minutes of fiddling with knobs and dials and more swearing. But eventually I manage this incomprehensible task as well. An hour after I began the Herculean quest of learning How to Use a Stove.....I have an actual pie baking in the oven. A pie made from apples that grew right here in this yard. This yard that had been watered by blood and tears for centuries. Apples filled with the essence of how many victims, I will never know. Am I sick? Am I a worthless traitor to my own race? Maybe. But this worthless traitor is making you a pie. And while it cooks, I tentatively begin exploring the house.

The sheer attention to detail is amazing. In one room, I find toys. At first glance it just looks like a normal child's playroom. But when I light a lamp and move into it to open the curtains and have a better look, I have to sit down almost immediately. And then the tears come. Covering my mouth with both hands, I stare around me at the treasures you've conjured from nothing.

There's the doll I gave you the first night I came back. Sitting on the floor nearby is the dollhouse I had as a child and loved so much. The dollhouse Daddy kicked in one drunken day during a rage. He'd thrown it out the day after. But here it is, whole and clean and looking brand new. The little fabric curtains Mom made for it are fresh, the felt she glued to the floor as carpeting doesn't have even a speck of dust on it. I stumble to my knees to see it better. Every tiny doll is freshly dressed and neatly seated at the dining room table, just as they were the day Daddy destroyed it. I shift my attention to the low bench nearby, and scoot forward to open the lid. Inside are stuffed toys, each one of them pulled right out of my memory and looking as though they'd just come from the manufacturer. I pull a

few out to hug them. Here is Big Kitty and Brown Bear and Muffin and Froggy. Chubbs and Mallow. My arms full of toys, I get up and wander over to the corner, where the beloved books of my youth are neatly organized on a very familiar yellow book shelf. The porcelain figurines I'd collected are all here, whole and clean. My father used to throw out my toys if they were in his way. All of them are here now. It's like you've unmade the past. And there are new things, too. A chess set I'd coveted and never had the money to buy is here. Porcelain dolls from catalogs I could never have afforded. This room is filled with all the treasures I'd lost, and all the treasures I'd never had. I spend an hour in the room, until the delicious scent of cinnamon and apple reaches me.

I run downstairs, still carrying a teddy bear with me, and open the oven to behold a perfectly cooked pie. Brown on top with apple juice and sugar bubbling out of the holes I poked in the crust. I lift it out carefully and set it on the counter to cool. And then it's back to the second floor to explore some more.

Morning turns to afternoon. Afternoon turns to evening. I've changed into clothes from my own house, and I'm out in the back yard just before sunset, eight bags of trash and weeds and dead branches lined up neatly against the fence. I'm covered in sweat, bleeding from a few scratches, and gloriously, completely happy. There were other houses up the road. I could use the old rusted wagon to take the bags of trash to the curb near them and just leave them there. The garbage truck will pick up anything left on the curb, right? I load up as many as I can and slowly pull it around to the front of the house. Cautiously looking all around to make sure no one sees me. And it's fine. The trip takes about ten minutes, and then the bags are on the curb. I go back for the rest, and wheel them toward the road as well.

And that's when everything goes wrong.

A car slows down as I walk up the road. I ignore it at first, focusing only on getting the trash to its destination. But a voice, a hated voice that I recognize immediately, pulls me out of my happy reverie.

"Beverly Marsh? Is that you?!"

I stop dead in my tracks, turning slowly to behold Greta Keene seated

behind the wheel of a sleek gray Audi. All the rage and hatred and sorrow and jealousy floods back to me, washing away everything good that had been building in me since this morning. I swallow hard, forcing a smile to come to a face that feels like it's made out of concrete.

"Greta. Hi." That's about all I can manage. She looks beautiful, slim and perfect, her blond hair pulled back from her pretty face with a silver barrette. The smirk she gives me as I stand with a shitty old wagon full of trash bags, sweaty and gross and wearing my most ragged jeans and filthy tshirt. We stare at one another for an awkward minute.

"I didn't know you were back in town. Not much here for you, is there."

Bitch.

"I uh...I came back a couple weeks ago."

She just sits there, her car idling in park, clearly enjoying how different we are. I feel a trickle of sweat running down my forehead, and I wipe it away with a grimy arm. Greta snickers.

"Oh my God, same old Beaverly. You look like shit."

"Thanks, Greta. Good to see you've grown up since high school."

"Oh, I HAVE. I'm married now! Only just three weeks ago. To the new dentist here in town. He's older than I am by a bit, but who CARES. He makes a ton of money. Do you like my car? David bought it for me as a birthday present! And you should SEE the diamond earrings he gave me. I'd invite you to come look, but I can smell you from here. What the hell are you doing?"

My face reddens, and I straighten slightly.

"Just a little yard work."

"For whom, may I ask? You don't live anywhere near here." Her eyes shift to the nearest house, which thank God isn't the Well House. "Wow, so you're like doing yard work for people now? What a cute

job that would have been when we were kids. Just think of all the calories you're burning!"

She laughs again, and I feel like screaming.

"Well Greta, it's been great to catch up. But I really need to get back to work."

"Mmm, I'm sure you do." She studies her manicured hand casually, then looks back to me. "You poor thing. I'll say a prayer for you."

And with that, she drives away again. I feel like a deflated balloon. When I was younger, I was never given to bouts of weeping. But for the second time today I find my eyes welling up. This time with sorrow and anger, not with joy. I pull the wagon to the curb and unhappily dump out the contents. My day is ruined, just like that. The reminder of what a little shit I am was all it took to make me feel helpless and defeated and thirteen years old again.

Sadly, I make my way back to the house in the crimson light of the sunset, and I slip into the back yard to store the wagon under the steps. I need to get cleaned up before you return. You said you'd be back before midnight. That could mean anything.

In the kitchen, I light the lamps and get the steaks out to warm up a bit before cooking them. I'll wait until you're actually here to do that part. Cold steak is never pleasant. Warily, I climb the stairs and head for the Master bedroom, looking forward to nothing more than a long hot bath and a change of clothes.

I am met with a blaze of cheerful firelight.

There are flowers in a dozen vases throughout the room, flowers of every color. A box is on the bed, wrapped in pretty red paper and gold ribbons, with the words 'Open Me' written across it in spidery black lettering. I am alone in the room, but it's plain you've been here. My heart lifting slightly, I shuffle over to the bed and wipe my filthy hands on my filthy t-shirt before reaching down to unwrap the present.

Inside is a gorgeous deep blue nightgown with a matching lace robe,

and on top of the silky fabric a diamond necklace sparkles brightly. A real diamond necklace. Oh my God, nothing that flashy and elegant could be fake. It must have cost more than a new car. More than a new gray Audi, certainly. I lift it up, my mouth open slightly as I stare at it, unable to believe my eyes. It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life.

"Do you like it?"

The voice comes from the corner. Your corner. And there you are, crouched like a cat in your resplendent costume, looking quite pleased with yourself. If I were a little braver I would throw myself into your arms and cover your face with kisses.

I hug the necklace to my chest, my eyes sparkling almost as brightly.

"Like it?! I love it! Nightmare, you didn't have to do this! The house... the clothes and the books and all my old toys...you've done more for me than I even know how to thank you for!"

Sniffling from my earlier cry, I wipe my face with the hem of my sweaty shirt. The sorrow melting away by degrees now that you're home.

"You were weeping downstairs. Why."

There's no point in lying to you. I shake my head, reluctantly putting the necklace down on the night stand and moving toward the bathroom to get out of these filthy clothes.

"I just ran into someone I didn't like. That's all. I...hope your hunting went well?"

You stalk after me, sniffing the air to catch my mood.

"Do not change the subject. Something has upset you. I will hear it."

I plug the drain in the tub and begin to fill it, not meeting your scarlet gaze. And after taking a deep breath, I softly relay to you the brief meeting outside when I was taking away the trash. Every horrible detail. Every emotion that bubbled up from the haunted depths of my worst memories. And I tell you even more. The bullying

I endured at Greta's hands. The way she made me feel. The names she called me.

"Then today, just before she left, she actually told me she'd pray for me. It was so condescending and so cruel. Pretending she even gives a shit whether I live or die. I'm sure she can't wait to tell all her friends, all the girls who hated me back when I was a kid, that she ran into me today and I was doing yard work for some family. I felt awful. I still feel awful."

Through it all, you simply listened as you always do. You may be the best listener I have ever met. When I fall silent, peeling off my clothing and stepping into the warm water, you creep to the edge of the tub and grip the side. Your black claws clicking against the white porcelain.

"She really should pray for herself rather than you." You growl, and the smile that lifts your perfect red lips is anything but pleasant. "I shall torture her for days before I finally allow her to die."

"WHAT?!"

"You cannot expect me to allow such disrespect to be shown to my future mate. I will taste her fear and flesh, and she will torment you no longer. It is a simple enough venture. I have her scent. I could find her no matter where she tried to flee and hide. But she will not flee and she will not hide, Beverly. She does not know that I am coming for her. Would you like to watch?"

"Oh my God!"

"Hush. Groom yourself, you have had a very long day and you have clearly worked quite hard. The yard looks superb. And I can smell that you cooked something. I wondered whether you would know how to use an antique stove."

"Penny..."

"You may call me Deimos now, if you wish." You lean forward to lick the side of my face affectionately. I'm stricken, shocked at what you've just said. I may hate Greta Keene, but I would have to really,

really loathe a person with every fiber of my being to want to see you unleashed on them. Talk about a fate worse than death.

"You don't have to kill her! I didn't tell you all this so you could hunt her down!"

"You promised never to interfere with my hunting. What did you bake?"

"Apple pie." I say faintly. There's no color in my face at all, and I can barely feel the water all around me. Nonchalantly, you shift around behind me and push me forward with your giant paws. I hold still as you pour water down my back, and I make no protest when you wash my hair and ease a lathered cloth all over my body. I don't even know what to say. Am I secretly happy at the thought of Greta's upcoming suffering? Am I really that terrible? I don't know. I shouldn't be. I know only a fraction of what you're capable of, and it was enough to inspire a hell of a lot of nightmares.

When I'm cleaned to your satisfaction, you lift me from the tub and wrap me in a towel like a child. Purring as you carry me to the bedroom.

"I ate well today, but I am certain that there is room for pie. There is never a time when I am not at least a little hungry."

I say nothing, still trying to find my voice.

You set me on the edge of the bed to continue drying me, and I begin to calm down at the soothing sensation of your hands on my body.

"I...I love you."

"I am aware. Lift your arms now."

Obediently, I do so, and a few minutes later I am dressed in the blue nightgown. You fuss with my hair a little before slipping the robe over my shoulders and tugging my hands through the sleeves. Then you clip the diamond necklace on me. I suddenly feel like a prize poodle being prepared for a dog show. But when you sit back on your haunches to admire the effect, the feeling vanishes to be replaced by a shy sort of pleasure.

"Do I look nice?"

"Good enough to eat, Dream. Come. I smell meat."

You prowl out of the bedroom door and into the dark hallway. After a moment I follow you. Barefoot, I pad down the stairs that I know you didn't bother to use. But when I reach the kitchen, you are already there. Crouched in the corner, watching me with eyes like lamps.

"How do you want me to cook your steaks?"

"Body temperature will be fine. I will even be a gentleman monster and sit at the table."

"Or I can sit on the floor with you."

"A kind gesture. Unnecessary. The chair will bear my weight well enough."

As if to prove the point, you get up and come to the table to sit down. The legs creak, but the chair does hold. I sigh, letting the tension ease away from me. Before going to the stove to light it again, I come to your side and touch your unruly mane of orange hair.

"Can I kiss you?"

"If you must."

Your lips are warm, soft, inviting. How can something so terrible be so enticing? It makes no sense. I wrap my arms around your neck, and you pull me closer with a contented growl as the kiss deepens. I am shaking by the time you release me. I make my way unsteadily to the counter, and begin seasoning the meat. Not that it will matter much to you.

So often over the past few days with you, there have been these little moments of gradual melting. An unexpectedly kind word. A claw on my skin that is gentle instead of rough. A look just a touch longer than the others. I'm not stupid enough to think that you're changing. People don't change. Neither do monsters. But you're showing me a side of yourself that is less guarded. Maybe I'm finally seeing you as

you truly are when you're not hunting or feeding or trying to keep the world at a distance.

"I have thought about the subject of our mating a great deal today." You suddenly say, apropos of nothing.

The salt shaker slips from my hands and rattles against the counter. I pick it up again, focusing hard on the little white crystals as they hit the meat.

"Oh?"

"I believe that your body would rip and bleed and you would experience agony on par with childbirth if I took you without proper preparation. And so I have decided to undertake these preparations."

People don't TALK like this! My stomach feels like it's full of pterodactyls and my head is light.

"You...what...prepare?"

"Eloquent as always. I will show you later. I believe, if my knowledge of human anatomy is as complete as I think it is, that you will find it very enjoyable. Oh, did you purchase flowers as well? I have just now noticed them on the sideboard there. How lovely. I am very fond of flowers."

Well now I really can't think. My mind settles into numb shock while my hands keep working. I put the steaks under the broiler, first mine and then, ten minutes later, yours. Turning mine when I do so. Yours will be practically raw. Mine, medium rare. I don't know how I know this. I only skimmed the instructions on my phone once. And I'm certainly not thinking now. In fact, I don't have any coherent thoughts whatsoever until I'm already seated at the table some time later, my steak half gone, the candles shimmering in pools of wax, a knife and fork in my hands. I look up with a start when you suddenly straighten in your chair and turn toward the dark window.

"What is it?! What's out there?!" I ask in alarm, looking wildly to the window as well. You side-eye me, blinking.

"Absolutely nothing as terrible as what's in here, I assure you. There

isn't anything outside the window. I simply felt my brother shift over a thousand miles to the west all at once. I do not know why. Neither of us have a need to escape anything, especially not in haste. But he tends to travel like this on occasion. I believe he is the more restless of the two."

"Phobos."

"Yes. I spoke too quickly, perhaps, when I told you never to seek him out. He would not harm you, not with my scent all over you. But you might find that you like him better."

"Deimos, that could never happen. Don't be silly."

"I am never 'silly'. It is a valid concern. I have decided that I wish to keep you, and I am not gentle. He is. And you seem to very much warm to tenderness." You snap, the annoyance coming to the surface again. You turn away from the window and pick up your steak again, biting off a chunk of the bleeding meat as though it were softened butter. I reach across the table to touch your other hand, fully expecting you to scratch me. You tug your hand back a little, but you don't snarl or bite.

"I'm going to live and die right by your side. Loyal to you and nobody else. If there were a thousand clowns and all of them wanted me, I would still choose you. I didn't fight so hard to get close to you just to leave you for another monster."

You say nothing, but your posture relaxes and you seem to be comforted by my words. I dare to push a little more, pleased that you'd worry about losing me when you were pretty eager to kill me off not long ago.

"You're going to be a wonderful lover. No one else in the world would even think about foreplay for a whole day just to make sure that their partner is ready for them."

"Four-what, then? I do not intend to play with you. I intend to pleasure you and ready your body for the blinding trauma that I will eventually put it through. You are no good to me dead. Well, not completely useless. I would eat you, of course. But it would bring me

no joy."

You lick some of the blood from your fingers, and suddenly my eyes are fixed on your tongue. It's got to be at least four inches long. Oh my God, what are you thinking of doing to me? My eyebrows rise as a wave of pure erotic need floods through me. But then your last sentences sink in.

"Wait. You're...planning on EATING me after I die?"

"Of course. Waste not."

"But that's barbaric! What about carrying my body to a sacred place and building a cairn of white stones and laying a red rose on top of it every year for the rest of your life?"

Now you're the one who looks shocked.

"Heart of the Void, Beverly! Who, or what, do you think you are speaking to? Do you see these teeth? Do you see these claws? Do I look like the sort of being who would build a cairn of white stones, and call that romance? I shall eat you before you cool, and you will become a part of me."

You take another bite of meat, and continue speaking as you chew.

"It should warm your heart to know that I will not leave a single morsel of your body to rot."

"I guess that's.....no! Deimos that's just gross!"

But you're not paying attention. You sniff at me curiously, and swallow the mouthful without taking your eyes from my face. When you speak again, your voice is low.

"You smell of desire."

"I..."

"Was it something I said? Are you perhaps so mentally ill that you find the subject of being eaten alluring?"

"N-not like that."

But the redness rising to my cheeks yet again is a dead giveaway. You seem pleased at the effect you're having on me. I drop my gaze to my plate, then scrape my chair back and stand up.

"You have to try the apple pie I made. I brought in apples from your tree in the back yard. And looked up the recipe on my phone. I think it's going to be amazing."

"I have never made anyone scream for a reason apart from fear and pain. This will be a new experience."

...damn you.

"I put in cinnamon and butter and sugar."

"I wonder how long it will take before you lose consciousness. And how much force I will need to exert to hold you down."

"I thought t-tomorrow I'd maybe make...um...chicken."

Chuckling, you wrinkle your nose at me playfully. I am reminded of the malicious glee you always took in my discomfort. Some things haven't changed. I bring the pie to the table and cut it in half, putting one entire side onto a plate for you. I cut a slice for myself from what remains, and safely put the table between us as I pick up my fork with a trembling hand. I want you. I fear you. I need you. I can't anticipate your reactions from moment to moment. There's too much HERE for me to deal with.

"Chicken sounds dead and boring. But I shall eat whatever you put before me out of politeness."

"When are you ever polite?"

"I brought you a pizza your very first night here."

"The box was covered in blood!"

"Well then. We both had a little treat, now didn't we."

It's strange, how precious I find the sight of your huge hand trying to hold a fork. But I love it. I love this. The delicious tenseness of our

flirting. Actually FLIRTING with one another. Bantering like a normal couple instead of putting me through the gauntlet of rage and threats like before. My whole body feels like it's been shot through with electricity. I feel twice as alive as I ever have before, and extremely eager to finish dinner and go back upstairs with you to the bedroom.

The pie is pretty decent for my first try, and between the two of us we finish it off completely. Eventually, I end up sitting on your lap feeding you chunks of sticky apple, giggling when your teeth graze my fingers. You pretend to snap at me, causing me to squeal. I didn't think it was possible to die of happiness for real, but right now I'm closer than I ever have been. I kiss you, messily, and the taste of cinnamon and apples lingers on our tongues. It begins as a few light kisses, turning swiftly into more.

This has to be some kind of pleasant dream, like the ones I used to have back in Portland. But no, it's real. You're real, real enough for me. I lean back a little, touching your face, and you growl happily.

"Deimos."

"Mmm?"

"Did you ever imagine....well...this?"

"Of course not, don't be ridiculous. Have you ever fantasized about a cow or a pig?"

Wow. Such romantic words. I'm about to ask you if that's how you see me when your long fingers tangle in my hair again, pulling me against your lips. I don't even want to struggle, but some deep portion of my animal brain registers that I am too close to a predator and must therefore be in danger. So I do struggle for a few seconds, until I can silence my instincts. It happens every time, I'm realizing. You seem to think nothing of it. But then, you are used to prey fighting back.

"I keep forgetting that I started out as just food to you." I whisper against your lips when you let me breathe. You grunt an assent to this, then tug me back in for another draining, intense kiss. Clearly you are beginning to enjoy this activity that you'd never done before.

Now I'm faced with, instead of a beast who wanted nothing to do with me and found physical contact to be somewhat repulsive...a creature who likes it very much and is constantly wanting more. How can I deny you anything? I don't even want to. Because the truth is, I am enjoying this too.

My tongue encounters teeth. God, so many teeth. Your fingertips are velvety, no claws protruding to tear my skin as you begin unlacing my robe. Oh...oh wow. Here? Right here? I guess...I guess we're doing this.

The whole table moves when you push at it with one hand, rising to your feet with me in your arms. Still kissing, my eyes closed, I am unprepared for the freezing cold and dizziness that slams into me. My eyes fly open, and we are in the bedroom. No climbing of the stairs. No walking down the hall. Just a moment of profound discomfort, and here we are. I wobble a little when you set me down, trying to talk around the distraction of you grooming the last of the apple pie off my face.

"Dei...mos....that...come on...you....what was....dammit....I'm clean!"

And I'm laughing again. You are too. Not the jeering, mocking, screechy cackle that you used to taunt us all the summer we met. A real laugh. Husky and soft and genuine. You are a creature that laughs. You are a creature that gets hungry, thirsty, sleepy, cranky, happy, jealous. You are a creature who has likes and dislikes, who can think and communicate and change your mind. Who can reason, who feels pleasure and pain. You are a creature like me. I take your white face in my hands and kiss you as though my life depended on it. You gently pick me up and settle me on the bed. The mattress sinks under our combined weight as you join me. My heart is pounding in my chest. I'm terrified and excited all at once.

My hands pull insistently at your clothing until you begin to remove it, and to finish removing mine. Within a few minutes, we are naked together. My perfect, belly-buttonless clown. The oil lamps dim by themselves until the room is cast into shadows. I touch your chest, and our fevered movements still as you look down at me in the dark. I can't see your face. Just the baleful glow of those eyes. God, those

eyes.

"I'm scared."

"I know. I smell it. Would you like me to stop? You must be tired. I would watch you rest."

And this in and of itself is shocking, because you want something and you are willing, for the first time, to deny yourself what you want in order to make someone else more comfortable. It's a shift from selfishness to compassion and generosity. I don't know what to make of it, and your words make me pause for a moment.

"N-no. No, don't stop. I don't want you to stop. I'm just scared because I want this, and I want you, and I love you and I don't want to disappoint you if I'm not any good at anything because I've never done most of the things girls my age have done."

"I do not expect you to be an expert. Relax, Dream. I will not hurt you."

"Have you ever said those words before?"

"No. I never lie."

I don't close my eyes. I keep them open, watching your vast nightmarish shape as you gently part my thighs and lower your head. The softness of your tongue against my inner thigh makes me jump, but your hands are firm on my hips. Holding me still and steady. This is tender, for you. But I will have bruises there when I look in the mirror tomorrow, perfect hand imprints one to each hip.

"Wait. Wait, before you do this....do you love me?"

I feel you sigh, and your voice is soft. Honest.

"I do not know what love is."

"You know everything! You know everything about human beings and all our...our frailties and everything that makes us strong. You know what love is. It's what makes one person throw themselves to you to save another."

"Are you suggesting that there is anything at all in existence strong enough to pose a threat to me? If something menaced you, I would kill it."

"That's not the point." I fight back tears, suddenly emotional now at the moment of intimacy. You lean up again and gather me into your arms, and I have no fabric to cling to. Just your shoulder. I hold on, going limp and letting you just cradle me.

"I love you. I love you and I need you to love me back."

"Child..."

"You know what it is! You haven't killed me! You comforted me, you fed me, you protected me, you gave me beautiful things. You kissed me, you bathed me, you let me cuddle up to you while I slept."

"Oh for pity's sake! Hush! Stop your worrying. I care for you. This is as close to love as I wish to get at this moment. Be content with it or go home."

Exasperation in your voice, but the words themselves are infinitely touching. You care for me. I slide my hand to your cheek, then to your lips. And the razor-sharp teeth that they hide. Deliberately, I prick my fingertip on one of them. You growl as the blood trickles into your mouth, and a moment later you are sucking gently on the injury. I can feel the healing tingle. You must be able to do that at will. It would ruin your food if you healed everything you licked.

"I'm content. I'm sorry. I'm being silly now."

"Yes, you are. But I forgive you. Now lie back, little morsel, and stop it with these childish worries. You are in bed with a monster. One would think you had more important things to worry about than whether he loves you or not."

"It's important."

You rest me down against the pillows, lightly caressing my body as you move back again. My legs are shaking when you ease them apart, lifting the hem of the nightgown. Your voice is as soft as breath. Softer than dandelion down brushing against a cheek.

"I know. That is why I will not say it until I fully understand. I will not.....insult you with half-truths, Beverly. Perhaps this is love. I do not know. But I will explore it with no one else. I will learn with no one else. If I do not love you, then I will never love. It is very simple."

Somehow, this is enough for me. It's more than enough. You really do get it, why I'm here and what's wrong with me and how much everything in my heart hurts and how your claws and your fiery gaze are the only things that bring any healing at all.

I grip the blanket so tight that my knuckles whiten when I feel the first contact of your tongue. This is more than I imagined I would ever experience. Almost more than I can bear. A tidal wave moving up the shore, washing away everything broken and crumbling in its wake. Leaving only smooth sand behind. My soul calms. The first whimper that rises to my lips is soothed away by one of your hands moving up to hold mine. Not a human. You are not a human. Is this bestiality? I guess so, in some odd way. I don't care. It's probably just as weird for you as it is for me.

You are patient and gentle, as gentle as a creature you size can be. I am weeping within seconds, helpless tears because this is too much and it feels too wonderful and I'm afraid of how high the pleasure will rise. It's already almost painful in its intensity. Pleasure and pain are very close together, the nerves can sing so loud that they scream.

I struggle. You let me struggle. When I desperately push at your white shoulders, you lean back and allow me to catch my breath for a few seconds before returning to the sensual play of tongue and skin and nerve endings, the shivering candlelight on a tear stained face. After every glorious, terrifying crescendo, there is the gentle weight of your hand on my face. You don't recoil from the flood of emotions that this pleasure releases. When I cry, you allow me to cry. When I scream, it's alright...you are used to screams. I beat at you with my small hands when a sudden fury overtakes me out of nowhere after the earth shattering release of another climax. You withstand the onslaught silently, and when I have run out of energy you hold me against you and groom the sweat and tears from my face.

This is more than foreplay. This is soul-surgery. Pain, fear, sorrow, elation, joy, love, need. All the things that a human being is capable

of feeling rise out of the dark waters of my mind and explode against the immobile bulwark of your white body. Barely visible in the gloom. Torture and lovemaking are not so different. They both require immense patience. They both require skill. They both result, if done correctly, in a release of everything pent up inside. You don't break me. But you come close. Very close.

When it's all over and I can take no more, you carry me to the bathroom and sink into the tub with me once more. My body is so sensitive that I flinch from the lightest touch, but I'm too exhausted to stop you. With the tenderness of a lion bathing a cub, you clean me thoroughly. I am cradled against your broad chest as though I weighed nothing, a little naked thing in the arms of a giant.

"...love..." I whisper to you as you carry me back to the bedroom. Under the sheets, my head lolls like a broken toy against your shoulder when you adjust me protectively against your side.

"Love." You echo.

The last thing of which I am aware before the veil of blessed darkness covers my mind is the warmth of your arms around me. And the deep rumble of your drowsy purr.